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by Bob Bloch



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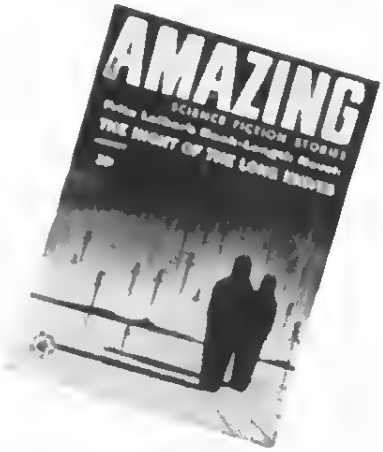
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Science Fiction Stories

JANUARY 1960

Volume 9 Number 1

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Editorial

WHENEVER Bob Bloch delivers a manuscript to us we read it with enthusiastic expectancy, waiting for the part where Bob tells the plot to wait a few minutes while he rears back and hauls off on some of his pet peeves about the world we live in. (That Bob manages to make his pronouncements integral and interesting parts of the story itself is just another tribute to his story-telling talents.)

Half a year ago (in *Fantastic* for July, 1958) Bob wrote a story ("The Last Plea,"), in the course of which he managed to demolish popular singers, Hollywood agents, the entire song-publishing business and teen-age rock 'n' roll aficionados in one fell swoop.

In this issue, in the cover-story novelet, "The Funnel of God," Bloch goes a few steps further and reveals the shallow shams of virtually all of our current fads, fancies and franticisms. And he does it so that the victims laugh (perhaps a bit self-consciously, shame-facedly), while the knife slits their jugulars.

There has been much discussion—which we hope to comment on in other editorials soon—as to whether science fiction is, can be, or should be a tool of social criticism. In our opinion, the answer is "yes" to all three. We live in an era when honest indignance is all too conspicuous by its absence. The newspapers report the most atrocious and outrageous events every day—and hardly anyone gets mad any more. Isn't it worthwhile? Don't we have the energy? Don't we have the guts?

Bob Bloch is one guy who does. We hope he will continue lacing his brilliant stories with the devastating social comment he not only is intellectually able to make—but emotionally willing to make.—NL

It came upon them like a galactic tornado—swirling, swallowing, a funnel of madness, a funnel of hate, a funnel of eternity. . . .

THE FUNNEL OF GOD

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATED by VARGA

WHEN Harvey Wolf was seven, he met the Black Skelm.

Now "skelm" means rascal, and at his age, Harvey knew nothing of duplicity and the ways of men, so he was not afraid. Nor did the man's skin repel him, for Harvey was ignorant of *apartheid.*

The Basutos on his father's place called him *baas*, but he did not feel that he was their master. Even Jong Kurt, his father's foreman, treated the men of color without contempt. Harvey came to know the Bechuanas, the Kaffirs, the Fingos and the Swazis far better than the *Roinecks*, which was their name for Englishmen.

Harvey knew his own father was a *Roineck,* who owned this place, but that was virtually the extent of his knowledge. His father never visited him; he spent all his time at the Cape, and had ever since Harvey's mother died when he was born. Harvey had been left in care of Jong Kurt and of his wife, whom Harvey learned to call Mama.

"Poor little one," Mama said. "But you are free and happy with us, so *goed genoeg.*"

And Harvey was happy. Mama made him *veldschoen* of rawhide, and he roamed at will over the *karroo* beyond the drift where the *fontein* gushed. As he grew older, he sought the *krantz* above the valley where he made his home, and soon he was climbing the great *berg* which towered over all.

Here he found the wild or-



In the hidden caves on the *berg* lived the Black Skelm, surrounded by his corps of hideous scavengers.

chids of the upland plateaus, plucked as he wriggled his way through the mimosa, the thornbush and the hartekoal trees where the *aasvogel* perched and preened and peered for prey.

Harvey came to know the beasts of the mountain and the plain—the aard-wolf and the inyala, the oribi and the duiker, the springbok and the kudu. He watched the tall secretary-bird and the waddling kori bustard, and traced the flight of bats from out of the hidden caves on the *berg* above. From time to time he encountered snakes; the *cobra di capello,* the puff adder, and the dreaded mamba.

But nothing that loped or trotted or flew or crawled ever harmed him. He grew bolder and started to explore the caves high upon the faraway *berg*.

That was when Mama warned him about the Black Skelm.

"He is an evil man who eats children," Mama said. "The caves are full of their bones, for on such a diet one lives forever. You are to stay away from the *berg*."

"But Kassie goes to the *berg* at night," Harvey protested. "And Jorl, and Swarte."

"They are black and ignorant," Mama told him. "They seek the Black Skelm for charms and potions. The wicked old man should be in prison. I have told Jong Kurt time and again to take the dogs to the *berg* and hunt him out. But he is too slim, that one, to be easily captured. They say he sleeps in the caves with the bats, who warn him when strangers approach."

"I would like to see such a man," Harvey decided.

"You are to stay away from the *berg,* mind?"

And Mama shook him, and he promised, but Harvey did not mind.

One hot morning he toiled across the *karroo,* slipping out unobserved from the deserted, heat-baked house, and made his way painfully up the *krantz*. The *aasvogels* drooped limply in the trees, their eyes lidded, for nothing moved in the plain below. Even the orchids were wilting.

It was no cooler on the *krantz,* and when Harvey found the winding *pad* which circled the *berg,* he paused, parched and faint, and considered turning back. But the trip would be long, and perhaps he could find a *fontein* up here. There were *pads* he had not yet explored—

He started off at random,

and thus it was that he came to the cave of the Black Skelm.

The Black Skelm was a gnarled little monkey-man with a white scraggle of beard wisping from his sunken cheeks. He sat at the mouth of the cave, naked and crosslegged, staring out at the *veldt* below with immobile eyes.

Harvey recognized him at once and put his knuckles to his mouth. He started to edge back, hoping that the old man hadn't observed him, but suddenly the scrawny neck corded and swivelled.

"Greetings, *baas*."

The voice was thin and piping, yet oddly penetrating. It gained resonance from an echo in the cave behind.

"G-greetings," Harvey murmured. He continued to edge away.

"You fear me, boy?"

"You are the Black Skelm. You—"

"Eat children?" The old man cackled abruptly. "Yes, I know the tale. It is nonsense, meant only to deceive fools. But you are not a fool, Harvey Wolf."

"You know my name?"

"Of course. An old man learns many things."

"Then you've come down to the plains?"

"Not for long years. But the bats bear tidings. They are my brothers of the nights, just as the *aasvogels* are my brothers by day." The Black Skelm smiled and gestured. "Sit down. I would invite you inside the cave, but my brothers are sleeping now."

Harvey hesitated, eyeing the little old man. But the man *was* little, and so very old; Harvey couldn't imagine him to be dangerous. He sat down at a discreet distance.

"The bats told you my name?" he ventured.

The wrinkled black man shrugged. "I have learned much of you. I know you seek the *berg* because it is your wish to see what is on the other side."

"But I've never told anyone that."

"It is not necessary. I look into your heart, Harvey Wolf, and it is the heart of a seeker. You think to gaze upon the lands beyond this mountain; to see the *olifant*, the *kameel*, the great black brothers of the rhenoster birds. But to no purpose, my son. The elephant, the giraffe, the rhinoceros are long gone. They have vanished, with my own people."

"Your people?"

"Those you call the Zulus." The old man sighed. "Once,

when I was a *jong*, the plains beyond the *berg* were black with game. And beyond the plains the *leegtes* were black with the *kraals* of my people. This was our world."

And the Black Skelm told Harvey about his world; the Zulu empire that existed long before the coming of the *Roinecks* and the Boers. He spoke of Chaka and the other great *indunas* who commanded armies in royal splendor, wearing the leopardskin *kaross* and lifting the knobkerrie of kingly authority to command the *impis*—the regiments of grotesquely painted warriors in kilts of wildcat tails. They would parade by torchlight, the ostrich plumes bobbing like the wild sea, and their voices rose more loudly than the wind in the cry of "*Bayete!*" which was the regal salute. And in return the *induna* chanted but a single response. "*Kill!*" Casting his spear to the north, the south, the east, or the west, he sent the regiments forth. And the *impis* killed. They conquered, or never returned. That was the way of it, in the old days.

Until, finally, none were left to return.

None but the Black Skelm, who sought the caves of the bats and the vultures, to live like a scavenger in a world of death.

"But my people are down there," Harvey protested. "They are not dead. They tell me Cape Town is a great city, and beyond that—"

"Cape Town is a cesspool of civilization," said the Black Skelm. "And beyond that are greater sewers in which men struggle and claw at one another, even as they drown. It is a sickening spectacle, this. The world will soon end, and I would that I could die with it. But, of course, I shall never die."

Harvey's head hurt; the sun was very hot. He wondered if he had heard aright.

"You can't die?"

"It is true, *baas*. Soon, of course, I must decide upon my next move, for this body of mine is no longer suitable. But—"

Harvey rose, reeling a bit, and backed away.

"Don't eat me!" he cried.

The old man cackled again. "Nonsense!" he said. "Sheer, superstitious nonsense. I do not eat children. My brothers feed me." He stretched forth his hand. "Look!"

And the air was filled with the odor of carrion, as the *aasvogels* gathered, fluttering frantically up the face of the sheer cliff and clustering

about the bony body of the wizened black. In their beaks they carried bits of rancid flesh, dropping their tribute into the Black Skelm's fingers.

Then Harvey knew that he was very sick indeed; the sun had played tricks. He ran into the cave, and it was dark and musty, and from the twisted caverns beyond welled a terrible odor of decay. The bats hung head downwards, hung in mute millions, and the floor of the cave was not covered with bones but with whitish droppings. On the walls great eyes winked—eyes that had been painted by hands long dead. The eyes whirled and Harvey felt his kneecaps turn to water. He would have fallen, but the Black Skelm came up behind him and caught him.

The old man's grip was surprisingly strong.

"Do not fear," he whispered. "Drink this." And he held out the hollowed skull. The liquid was warm and red.

"Blood," Harvey quavered.

"Of cattle. It is pure and fresh."

"But you are a wizard—"

"What is a wizard? Merely a seeker, like yourself. A seeker who has perhaps peered further than the land beyond the mountain."

The Black Skelm led him back to the mouth of the cave, and bade him sit in the shadows there. Harvey was suddenly very tired. He closed his eyes, scarcely listening, as the Black Skelm droned on.

"All men are seekers, but each chooses a different path in his search for understanding. There is the path of Columbus who sought to encompass the earth and the path of Galileo who sought to search the heavens; the sevenfold path of Buddha which led, he hoped, to Nirvana, and the path of Appolonius which is an inward spiral with oblivion at its core. There is Einstein and—"

Harvey opened his eyes. He was, he knew, quite delirious. The black man sitting beside him, chanting strange names, eating out of the beaks of vultures, talking of Zulu *kraals* which had vanished a hundred years ago—this was a feverdream. He could hear only bits and snatches.

"You will be a seeker, too, Harvey Wolf. You will go out into the world to look for knowledge. Eventually you will sicken of knowledge and try to find truth. Perhaps we can discover it together—"

Harvey's head throbbed. The sun was blazing off in the west, sinking beneath the pur-

ple lower lid of a gigantic cloud. And a voice was echoing along the *berg,* calling, "Harvey — Harvey, where are you?"

"Jong Kurt!" Harvey rose.

The Black Skelm was already on his feet, scuttling into the shadows of the cave.

"No, wait—come back!" Harvey called, groping after the old man and nearly falling as his fevered body convulsed in a sudden chill.

But the old man retreated into the cave.

And then Jong Kurt was looming on the pathway, his face grave and his forehead seamed with apprehension. He caught the reeling boy in his arms.

Suddenly the blackness blossomed and burst forth from the cave, a blinding billowing of squeaking, stenchful shadows—shadows that flapped and fluttered and stared with millions of little red eyes.

Jong Kurt fled down the mountain, carrying Harvey Wolf. But the eyes followed, haunting Harvey's delirium in dreams. . . .

They sent him away, then. Harvey wasn't conscious when the decision was made, though he did see his father once, afterwards, at the dock in Cape Town. His father introduced him to his Uncle Frank, from America, and gave him strict orders about minding his manners and following instructions. There was talk about a New Life and a Good School and the Unhealthy Outlook that comes from being alone.

Harvey tried to tell his father about the Black Skelm, but his father wouldn't listen; not even Mama or Jong Kurt had listened. They all said Harvey had suffered from sunstroke, and in the end he came to believe it himself. It had all been heat and hallucination and nothing was real now but the great ocean and the great city.

In New York his Uncle Frank and his Aunt Lorraine were very kind. They took vicarious pleasure in his amazement at the sight of the city, and conducted him to his first motion picture.

That seemed to be a mistake, and after they dragged the frightened, hysterical child out of the theater he suffered what the doctor called a "relapse." Afterwards, he forgot the whole incident, and it wasn't until years later—

But meanwhile, Harvey grew up. He went to school and he managed to endure the tight, idiotic abominations called "Health Shoes." Grad-

ually he accumulated the fund of knowledge necessary for a child to flourish in our society —that is to say, he could identify the various makes and models of automobiles in the streets, he learned the names of "baseball stars," and the meanings behind the four-letter words and the slang-phrases of the day.

Also, he learned to insulate his interior existence from other eyes; he found that seekers are not popular with their fellows, so he concealed his interests from his playmates. His teachers, however, were not unaware of his intelligence; at their advice he went on to private schools and from there to an Ivy League college.

He was still there when Uncle Frank and Aunt Lorraine went over to Cape Town to bring his father back for a reunion; he was there when the news came to him that the private plane had crashed on the return flight.

After the funeral he visited the attorneys.

They told him he had inherited the entire estate. Once liquidated, with all taxes paid, he could count on an accumulation of better than three million dollars. It would be ready for him by the time he reached his twenty-first birthday.

Right then and there he made a sensible decision; he decided it was time to retire.

It was not just the caprice of a spoiled brat or a rich man's heir. At twenty-one, Harvey Wolf was a fairly presentable young man—many girls even found him handsome, for three million reasons—and he possessed an alert intellect.

He turned his back on the world only because he was fed up with hypocrisy and liars.

Harvey's first move was to leave the college. He said farewell forever to its small Humanities Department and its huge football stadium.

Next, he departed from a church whose spiritual representatives appeared at launching ceremonies to bless aircraft carriers and destroyers.

At the same time he walked out on most of the phenomena and beliefs held dear by his peers; on chauvinism, on racial prejudice, on the feudal caste-system glorified by the armed forces of our democracy.

He briefly considered going into business, until he found he couldn't subscribe to the widespread doctrine that there is some mystically ennobling value attached to

"competition" and that somehow everybody benefits under a system where one man is dedicated to outsmarting another.

Harvey turned his back on the life of a wealthy idler because he could not tolerate the common amusements. He did not believe that animal-killers were "sportsmen," whether they dressed in red coats and drank champagne before chasing a fox or wore dirty dungarees and guzzled beer out of the bottle before shooting at an unsuspecting duck. He did not think that baseball players or boxers or even bullfighters were as much heroic as they were overpaid. He squinted but saw nothing in abstract art; he listened, but heard nothing in its credos and critiques.

Harvey Wolf turned his back on Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, Christmas, and all the other holidays heralded by the joyous tinkle of cash-registers on high. He deplored the phoney virility of the men's magazines, the fake coyness of the women's magazines, and the artificial social values which emotionally warped young people into "manliness" or "femininity."

Taking stock of himself, Harvey found he did not worship sportscars or subscribe to the "theory of obsolescence" dearly beloved by manufacturers and dearly paid for by consumers. He abhorred drum-majorettes, bathing beauty contests, and the publicity given "Miss Canned Goods" or the "Oklahoma Cucumber Queen." He took a dim, pained view of billboards, and disliked the transformation of natural parks and beauty spots into commercialized locales for hot-dog stands and souvenir concessions which sold little wooden outhouses.

He held opinions which would automatically antagonize all fraternity-members, morticians, professional evangelists, Texans, and the marchers in St. Patrick's Day parades. He did not believe in *caveat emptor;* card players who slam each trick down on the table and bellow at the top of their lungs; fake "frontier days" held by rough, tough pioneer towns in the wilds of New Jersey; sound engineers who "ride the gain" on TV commercials; professional fund-raisers who take 40% off the top in charity drives, or people who take pride in announcing that they are "quick-tempered," as though this statement entitled them to special privileges.

Harvey held a bias against practical jokers, and people who obscure driving visibility by decorating their car-windows with dangling dolls, oversize dice, baby shoes, and imitation shrunken heads. He saw no sense to endurance-contests, had no patience with litter-bugs, failed to believe in Beggar's Night or politicians who "compromise" after election at the expense of repudiating their campaign pledges. He had a contempt for Muscle Beach exhibitionists and he objected to the rewriting of history under the guise of "patriotism." He—but the list is endless, and of interest only to psychiatrists; *they* get $50 an hour for listening.

Harvey Wolf didn't go to the psychiatrists—not yet, at any rate, including the $50 an hour one.

He thought he was searching for something to believe in and that perhaps he could find it in good, hard, scientific logic.

So he sailed for Europe, to study at the source.

In Edinburgh, Harvey encountered a Brilliant Doctor who prided himself on complete objectivity.

"Nothing," said the Brilliant Doctor, in one of his famed private seminars, "is ever finally 'proved' and everything remains possible in theory.

"For example, granted the loose molecular structure of both a human body and a brick wall, it is only logical to concede that, with the exact proper alignment of every single molecule in the given body with every single molecule in the given wall, at a given instant it would be possible for said body to walk through said wall and emerge unscathed on the other side.

"The chances are almost inconceivably infinitesimal, but the *possibility* must be granted."

Harvey Wolf thereupon asked the Brilliant Doctor, in the light of this opinion, what he thought of allied phenomena. What of his late countryman, the Scottish medium, D. D. Home, who practiced levitation? He rose, resting on his back in mid-air, then floated out of one second-storey window and back into the room through another, in full view and broad daylight.

"Nonsense!" said the Brilliant Doctor.

Harvey Wolf blinked. "But no less an observer than the distinguished scientist, Sir William Crookes, testified he had witnessed this feat with his own eyes," Harvey replied.

"Impossible!" said the Brilliant Doctor. . . .

At Oxford, Harvey Wolf was enthralled by a Learned Scholar who spoke of the biological basis of Life and the almost metaphysical borderland between Being and Nothingness.

"The electromagnetic principles governing sentience and consciousness are still indefinable," he announced. "No man has yet isolated the Life Force or truly defined death or nonexistence except in terms of its absence."

Harvey Wolf was interested. What, he asked, did the Learned Scholar think of Pierre and Eve Curie's signed testimony that they had seen genuine evidence of psychic phenomena demonstrated by a medium? What about Thomas Edison's similar convictions, and his final experiments in communication with the spirit world?

"There is no objective validity offered in evidence here," said the Learned Scholar.

"But we ignored electricity for thousands of years," Harvey protested. "Its omnipresent existence was unknown to us except in lightning until we found a means of harnessing this force. Surely, if the borderline between existence and non-existence, consciousness and unconsciousness, cannot be exactly defined, and yet is apparently subject to certain definite principles—

"Utter rot!" said the Learned Scholar. . . .

In Heidelberg, Harvey Wolf studied under a famous Herr Doktor-Professor whose technical mastery of neuropathology was exceeded only by his interest in psychosomatic medicine. The Herr Doktor-Professor was extremely liberal in his outlook, and even admitted prodromosis as a basis for diagnosis.

"I knew a surgeon who was in charge of an army hospital during the war," Harvey said. "One of his patients was completely paralyzed from the waist down—the spinal cord had been entirely severed and there was no nervous response. He lay in bed, wasting away, and was informed he'd never move his legs again. He refused to accept the verdict. Each day he pulled himself up in bed, lifted his legs over the side, tried to stand. The surgeon gave strict orders to restrain him, but he persisted. After two gruelling months, he stood. A month later he took his first step. All tests showed it was physically im-

possible for him to exercise any control over his legs, but he walked—"

"Impossible!" muttered the Herr Doktor-Professor.

"Yet what about Edgar Cayce and his clinically-verified healings of organic disorders with no possible basis in hysteria? What about—"

"Dumkopf!" opined the Herr-Doktor Professor. . . .

In the Sorbonne faculty, Harvey met a Celebrated Savant with unorthodox views; a man who dared to side with Charles Fort in his questioning of organized science. He once stated that if we accepted the theory of evolution from a non-anthropomorphic viewpoint, it was quite possible to believe that man's function on earth was merely to act as host for cancer cells which would eventually learn to survive the death of the human body and emerge as the next, higher life-form. He was even fond of quoting Mark Twain and others to the effect that the stars and planets of our universe might be merely the equivalent of tiny corpuscles moving through the blood-stream of some incalculably huge monster. And that this monster, in turn, might walk the surface of another world in another universe which in turn might be composed of similar corpuscles—*ad infinitum* to the nth_2 power.

"It is a humbling thought," the Celebrated Savant observed, and Harvey Wolf agreed.

"A far remove from petty human concepts," Harvey mused. "There is no need to concern oneself with trivia in the face of it now, is there?"

But the Celebrated Savant wasn't listening; he was reading the newspaper and scowling.

"Those pigs of Algerians!" he muttered to himself. "Yes, and those lousy *colons*, bidding for power and setting up education for all. It is a disaster!"

Harvey shrugged. "The world is only a corpuscle," he said. "Or perhaps it's just a virus-cell in the bloodstream of the Infinite. What does it matter?"

"Cochon! The purity of the State depends upon maintaining our autonomy. And furthermore, young man—"

Harvey Wolf found himself walking out once more. But this time he was walking out into Paris.

Paris, of course, is what you make it. To cutpurse Villon, living from hand to mouth and from the *Small* to the

Grand Testament, it was a city of cold cobblestones where every twisted alley led only to the inevitable gibbet. To Bonaparte it was the site of a triumphal arch through which he marched to celebrate victory—or furtively avoided, in a solitary coach, as he whipped his horses from the field of Moscow or Waterloo. Toulouse-Latrec clattered across Paris leaning upon two sticks, and his city was a gaslight inferno. There is the *Sec* and *Brut* Paris of poutlipped Chevalier, the cerebral city of Proust and Gide and Sartre, the Paris of the GI on leave for *couchez-vous* carnival. There is the Paris of the tourist—the Louvre's legweary legacy, the giddy gaping from the Eiffel Tower, the hasty concealment of the paperbound *Tropic of Cancer* at the bottom of the suitcase. There is a Paris as gay as Colette, as tough as Louis-Ferdinand Celine, as weird as Huysmans. You pay your money and you take your choice.

And when you have three million dollars—

Harvey Wolf brooded about it in a Montmartre *bistro*. A bearded man stared at him with yellow cat-eyes and said, "Welcome, Pontius Pilate."

"Pilate?" echoed Harvey Wolf.

"I recognize the mood," said the bearded man. "You are asking yourself Pilate's age-old question—*what is Truth?*"

"And the answer?"

"Truth is sensation," the bearded man told him. "Sensation alone is reality. All else is illusion."

"Hedonism, eh? I don't know—"

"You can learn. Experience is the great teacher."

Harvey was sated with civilization, sick of science. He spent six months with the bearded man and the bearded man's friends. He rented a villa near Antibes, and many guests came.

There was the dwarf girl and the giantess and the woman with the filed and pointed teeth; the lady who slept only in a coffin and never alone; the girl whose luggage consisted solely of a custom-made traveling case filled entirely with whips. There was a rather unusual troupe of artists whose specialty consisted of a pantomime dramatization of the *Kama Sutra*.

Long before the six months were up, Harvey realized that his meeting with the bearded man had not been accidental. Behind the beard was neither Jesus, D. H. Lawrence or even a genuine Gilles de Rais—merely a weak-chinned, loose-

lipped voluptuary adventurer who had visions of sugarplum splendor in the form of a billion-*franc* blackmail scheme.

Harvey got rid of him, at last, for considerably less, and he did not begrudge the price he finally paid. For he had learned that the senses are shallow and the orgasmic is not the ultimate peak of perceptivity.

Harvey went to Italy and immersed himself in Renaissance art. He journeyed to Spain and somehow he found he'd started to drink. A girl he met introduced him to some little capsules her friends smuggled in from Portugal. At the end of another six months he was picked up in the streets of Seville and shipped back home through the kindly offices of the American consulate.

They put him in Bellevue and then in a private san upstate. Harvey kicked the habit and emerged after a loss of four months and forty pounds.

He ended up, as do most seekers after Truth, on the confessional couch of a private psychiatrist.

The psychiatrist decided that perhaps Walt Disney was to blame for it all.

Harvey admitted the man had an interesting argument. He was able, after many sessions, to recall his first visit to the movies when he'd come to America. Uncle Frank and Aunt Lorraine had taken him to see what was perhaps the most famous short cartoon of the Depression era—*The Three Little Pigs*.

He could recreate quite vividly, without the aid of narcohypnosis, the strong fear-reaction engendered by the sight of the Big Bad Wolf stalking the helpless pigs. He remembered how the Wolf huffed and puffed and blew the straw house in. What happened immediately thereafter he did not know, because it was then that he had been carried, screaming, from the theater.

It was, the psychiatrist averred, a "traumatic incident." And now, as an adult, Harvey had read a great deal about animated cartoons and their possible effect on children. Following the success of *The Three Little Pigs* it seemed as if the entire concept of cartoon-making underwent a drastic change. In place of playful Pluto and droll Donald Duck came a horde of ferocious bulldogs, gigantic cats with slavering fangs; huge animal menaces who tormented smaller creatures and sought to devour them in their great red maws.

But, if anything, their little intended victims were worse; they always outwitted the hulking pursuers and seemed to take fiendish delight in sadistic revenge. One animal was always crushing another under a truck or a steamroller; pushing his enemy off a steep cliff, blasting his head open with a shotgun, blowing him up with dynamite, dragging his body across the teeth of a great circular saw. During the years, the so-called "kiddy matinee" became a horror-show, a *Grand Guignol* of the animal kingdom in which atrocious crimes and still more atrocious punishments flashed in fantastic fashion across the screen in lurid color, to the accompaniment of startlingly realistic shrieks, groans, screams of agony, and cruel laughter.

Parents who carefully and conscientiously shielded their supposedly innocent youngsters from the psychological pitfalls of the dreaded comic-books were quite content to listen to the same moppets shriek uncontrollably at the sight of a twenty-foot high animated hyena being burned to death while the happy little rabbit squealed in ecstatic glee.

Harvey had read about this and he listened when the psychiatrist told him there was probably no harm in such fantasies—to the average child it was merely a vicarious outlet for aggression. Such a child unconsciously identified with the small animal who destroyed the larger tormenter; the bigger creature symbolized Daddy or Mama or some authority-figure, and it was satisfying to witness their defeat. The weapons employed were direct concepts and representations of adult civilization and its artifacts. Most children were exposed to such films from infancy on and grew up without psychic damage. As normal adult human beings they were able to go out into the world and fight its battles. Indeed, it was the avowed purpose of many psychiatrists to keep them "mentally fit" during real battles, so that they could continue to spray liquid fire from flame-throwers upon enemy soldiers cowering in tanks, or drop bombs on unseen thousands of women and children.

It was merely unfortunate, said the psychiatrist (at $50 an hour) that Harvey had been brought up away from the influences of normal society and abruptly exposed to the symbolism of the cartoon.

And there were, of course, other factors.

The fact that Harvey's last name happened to be Wolf—so that his little American playmates insisted on calling him "The Big Bad Wolf" when they innocently ganged up on him at recess and tried to emulate the punishments inflicted by the heroic little pigs in the film.

The fact that Harvey, instead of acting any normal, redblooded American boy and fighting back against the six or eight older bullies who came after him with planks and stones, chose to cry and bleed instead.

The fact that Harvey soon underwent another traumatic cinematic experience when he saw a picture called *The Wolf Man* and its sequels, and gradually came to accept and identify with the role symbolized by his last name.

The fact that Harvey seemed to have totally misinterpreted the message; to him it wasn't important that the Wolf was destroyed, but that he was revived again in the sequels.

Regrettably, said the psychiatrist (at great and expensive length) he seemed to have equated acceptance of his Wolf role with survival. As an adult, he had become a Lone Wolf, moving away from the pack. And his self-styled search for Truth was merely a search for the Father-Image, denied him in childhood.

Harvey attempted, at one point in his analysis, to talk about the Black Skelm and that fantastic fever-dream atop the *berg*. The psychiatrist listened, made notes, nodded gravely, inquired into the duration of his subsequent illness, and went back to his theory about the traumatic effect of the films. What had Harvey thought when the Wolf Man was beaten to death with a cane by his father in the movie? Did Claude Rains, as the father, remind Harvey of his own parent? Did he perceive the phallic symbolism of the silver cane used as an instrument of punishment? And so on, blah, blah, blah—until Harvey Wolf got up from the couch and walked out again.

Psychotherapy had its own truths, but its methodology was still magic. One had to believe in certain *formulae*, in spells and incantations designed to cast out demons. At the same time there was this pitiful insistence upon a "realistic" interpretation; an attempt to reconcile frankly magical

methodology with the so-called "normal" world.

Perhaps it was silly to compromise. The therapy-sessions had caused Harvey to think about the Black Skelm once more, for the first time in twenty years. He remembered how the little shriveled savage had spoken of Einstein, and of Appolonius of Tyana. He had sat all alone in a bat-cave atop a mountain, drinking warm blood from a skull, but he *knew*. He had a surety which science and philosophy and art only adumbrated, and the source of his knowledge must be magical insight.

Harvey moved down into the Village and began to fill his ramshackle apartment with books on occultism and theosophy. He avoided the local Beat types, but inevitably the word leaked out. The crackpots came to call, and eventually he met a girl named Gilda who claimed to be one of the innumerable illegitimate offspring of the late Aleister Crowley.

Soon he found himself standing in a darkened room, facing the East, with a steel dagger in his right hand. He touched his forehead saying, in the Hebrew tongue, *Atch;* touched his breast and murmured *Malkuth;* touched his right shoulder as he intoned *Ve-Geburah* and his left as he muttered *Ve-Gedullah.* Clasping his hands upon the breast, with dagger pointed upwards, he shouted *Le-Olahm, Aum.*

Nothing happened.

Gilda's further experiments in sex-magic were equally (and fortunately) nonproductive. She attempted to interest him in a Black Mass, but before details could be arranged she ran off with a young man who yapped obscene ballads in public places but was granted the protection the law affords a folk-singer.

Harvey Wolf decided that he would continue his search alone.

During the year that followed he made many contacts and experiments. Undoubtedly he met with followers of Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley. Quite certainly he investigated the effects of lysergic acid and peyote.

Both produced the same trance phenomena. Harvey found himself regressing, the film of his life running backwards, until he reached the point where he was enveloped in the billowing black bat-cloud from the *berg.* The little red eyes swirled fire-fly fashion all around him, then vanished into a greater dark-

ness. He stood alone on the mountain.

Yet not quite alone, because the Black Skelm was there, pointing to the path and whispering, "I have waited long, *baas*. The time has come when we must journey together."

The message was manifest; Harvey Wolf knew he would go back to Africa.

Another Wolfe had said *You Can't Go Home Again*, and in his more objective moments Harvey knew this was right. Twenty years had passed and nothing was left of the Africa he'd known. The world kept changing.

There were new governments with new slogans, new reasons to hate their neighbors, and new weapons poised to punish them. A new spurt of population, subject to new mutations of disease, sought new areas of conquest. Missiles had reached the moon and Man would follow, then go on to the stars with his civilized cargo of bombs, chewing-gum, carbon monoxide and laxatives. Eventually the millenium would come; a Soviet Federated Socialist Republic of the Solar System or a United Interplanetary States. If the former prevailed, Saturn would be set up as the new Siberia; if democracy triumphed, special facilities for certain groups would be set up on Pluto—separate, but equal, of course.

Harvey Wolf made one last effort to escape such cynical considerations and their consequences. He became an ascetic; a disciple of Raja, Brahma and Hatha Yoga. He took a cabin in the Arizona desert and here he meditated, fasted, and grew faint.

And the Black Skelm came into his dreams and chanted, "This is not the path. Come to me. I have found the way."

So, in the end, Harvey returned to the dark womb—to the Africa of his birth.

He found a new spirit at the Cape; *apartheid* had arisen, sanctioned by the sanctimonious and condoned by the cartel of dedicated men whose mission it was to artificially inflate the price of diamonds with which the wealthy bedeck their wives and their whores.

At first they would not even give Harvey permission to journey upcountry, but his father's name—and a distribution of his father's money—helped.

This time Harvey made the trip in a chartered plane, which set him down on the flat *veldt* near the old place and (in accordance with orders) left him there.

The old place had changed, of course. Kassie, Jorl, Swarte and others were gone, and no herds of humpbacked cattle roamed over the plain. The great house was deserted, or almost so; Harvey prowled the ruins for ten minutes before the elderly man with the rifle ventured forth from an outbuilding and leveled ihs weapon at him in silent menace.

"Jong Kurt!" Harvey cried. And the old man blinked, not recognizing him at first—just as Harvey didn't recognize a Kurt whom the years had robbed of any right to retain his nickname.

Kurt lowered his rifle and wept. He wept for the passing of the old place, for the death of Mama, for the changes which had come to both of them. Did the *baas* remember the way it had been? Did he remember the night Kurt had carried him, faint with delirium, down the mountainside?

"Yes, I remember," Harvey murmured. "I remember it very well."

"When you left, your father sold the cattle. The boys went into the mines, everybody left. Only Mama and I stayed on, alone. Now she is gone, too." Kurt knuckled his eyes.

"And the Black Skelm?" Harvey said. "What happened to him?"

"He is dead," Kurt answered, shaking his head solemnly.

"Dead?" Harvey stiffened in the suddenness of the thought. "Do you mean that you—"

Kurt nodded. "Your father gave orders. The day after you went to the Cape, I took the dogs up to the *berg*. I meant to hunt him down, the *verdamte* scoundrel."

"You found him there?"

The old man shrugged. "Only the bones. Picked clean, they were, on the side of the ledge near the mouth of the cave. The carrion had fed his vultures for the last time."

Kurst wheezed and slapped his thigh, and he did not see the pain in Harvey's eyes.

"But why do we stand here, *baas?* You will stay the night with me, eh? Your plane does not return before tomorrow?"

Harvey murmured an acceptance of the invitation. It was true, his plane would not return until the next day. He'd thought to spend the interval in ascending the *berg*, but there was no need now. The Black Skelm was dead.

You Can't Go Home Again.

Kurt had comfortable quarters in one of the smaller outbuildings. Game was scarce, but there was eland steak for dinner. The old man had learned to brew beer in the traditional Kaffir fashion, and after the meal he sat reminiscing with the young *baas* and drinking toasts to the past. Finally he succumbed to stuporous slumber.

Harvey stretched out on a bunk and tried to sleep. Eventually he succeeded. Then the bat came.

It flew in through the open window and nuzzled at his chest, brushing its leathery wings against his face and nuzzling him with tiny teeth that grazed but did not bite. It chittered faintly.

Harvey awoke to a moment of horror; horror which subsided when the bat withdrew to a corner of the room. Kurt snored on, stentoriously, and Harvey sat up, brushing at the black, winged creature in an effort to drive it back out through the window.

The bat wheeled about his head, squeaking furiously. Harvey rose, flailing his arms. He opened the door. The bat hung in the doorway. Harvey beat at it. It whirled just out of arm's reach. Then it hung suspended in midair and waited.

Harvey advanced. He stood gazing across the moonlit emptiness of the *veldt*—a lake of shimmering silver beyond which towered the black hulk of the *berg*.

The bat cheeped and flapped its wings before him. Suddenly Harvey conceived the odd notion that the wings were *beckoning*. The bat wanted him to *follow*.

Then he knew. The Black Skelm wasn't dead. He was waiting for Harvey, there on the mountain. He had sent a messenger, a guide.

Harvey didn't hesitate. He went out into the moonlit plain and it was like the first time. Now he was a grown man in boots instead of a child in rawhide *veldschoen*, and it was night instead of day, but nothing had changed. Even the odd delirium rose to envelop him once again; not the fever born of the hot sun but the chill of the cold moon. He trudged across the silver silence of the sand and the bat swooped in sinister silhouette before him. When Harvey reached the *krantz* he almost decided to turn back; this was no mysterious midnight mission, only the

tipsy *fugue* of an over-imaginative man unused to the potency of Kaffir beer.

But they were waiting for him there in the shadows; huddled in teeming thousands, their tiny red eyes winking a greeting. And now thy rose all about him, covering him in a living cloak. He glanced back and found they had closed in solidly, forming a living barrier against retreat. The acrid stench was in itself a wall through which he dared not pass, so he went forward, up to the winding *pad* which took him, toiling, to the top of the *berg*.

He saw the mouth of the cave looming before him, and then all vision faded as the moon was blotted out by a cloud—a cloud of wavering wings. The bats flew off and he stood alone on the mountain-top.

The Black Skelm came out of the cave.

"You *are* alive," whispered Harvey. "I knew it. But Kurt spoke of finding bones—"

"I placed them there for that purpose." The Black Skelm wove his wrinkles into a smile. "I did not wish to be disturbed until you returned. I have waited a long time, *baas*."

"Why didn't you summon me sooner?"

"There were things you had to learn for yourself. Now you are ready, having seen the world. Is it not as I described?"

"Yes." Harvey nodded at the gnarled little black man. "But how could you know these things? I mean—"

He hesitated, but the Black Skelm grinned. "You mean I am an ignorant old savage, a witch-doctor who believes in animism and amulets." He scratched his grisly chest. "Whereas you are a man of worldly wisdom. Tell me—what is Jack Paar *really* like?"

Harvey blinked, and the old man chuckled. "You are so naive in your sophistication! *Baas*, I have seen far more than you in your brief lifetime. Although my base body sat and shriveled in this cave, my spirit ventured afar. I have been with you throughout your wanderings. I was in the theatre when you screamed; I sat with you in seminars; I felt the caress of the woman with her silver-tipped whips; I was one with you when you raised the dagger to invoke the All-Being. There are ways of transcending space and time."

"But that's impossible!" Harvey muttered. "I can't think—"

"Don't try to think." The Black Skelm rose, slowly and stiffly. "One does not learn through processes of organized logic, for the world is not a logical place. Indeed, it is not a place at all—merely an abstract point in infinity. True knowledge is intuitional; an impressionary process which might be labelled as heuristics."

Harvey shook his head. "You drink cattle-blood and summon bats, and you speak of heuristics—unbelievable."

"Yet you believe."

"I believe. But I don't understand. You have these powers. Why live like an animal in a cave when you might have gone forth to rule the world?"

"The world?" The old man put his hand on Harvey's shoulder; the weight was as slight as a sere and blackened leaf. "Look down there."

Together they stared at the silvery *veldt.*

"The world is a plain," said the Black Skelm. "And beyond, as we know, are the cities of the plain. Do you remember what happened to those cities? *Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and he overthrew those cities and all the valley and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.* Remember?"

"Yes. You're trying to tell me that the world will soon come to an end."

"Can you doubt it, after what you've seen?"

"No."

"The Lord remembered Abraham and brought him to the safety of the hills." The black man smiled, but Harvey stared at him.

"Is that why you sent for me? Because you're—"

"God?" The black man shook his head. "Not yet. I have not chosen. That is why I waited for you. Perhaps you can help me choose."

"I don't understand—"

"Every man is God, or contains within him the seed of godhead. Look." The Black Skelm fumbled with a little leather pouch at his waist and drew forth a dark, shrivelled object.

"This is a nut, encased in an outer shell. Within is the seed, the kernel. The hard shell is our human consciousness. Once broken, the kernel can be reached, the seed liberated to sprout and grow, to spread through space and thrust beyond the stars."

The Black Skelm twirled the spheroid in his wrinkled

palm. "Shall we open the shell and partake?" he murmured. "No, it isn't like peyote, or your lysergic acid, either. I spent years searching for the seed, which indeed comes from the Tree of Knowledge. Once eaten, it will do more than merely expand and extend consciousness. Consciousness will be discarded, like the empty husk it is, and the soul will flourish. Flourish and soar beyond all being."

He cracked the shell and dug within.

"Here, will you share with me?"

"But—why?"

The Black Skelm sighed. "Because the human part of me is old, and afraid. It may be that I will not enjoy being God. It must, I think, be a lonely estate. When you came to me as a child I recognized a fellow-seeker, and I knew that I would wait for you to join me on the quest."

Harvey stared. "This isn't just part of some crazy dream?"

"It's all a crazy dream, you know that," said the Black Skelm, softly.

"And if it works—suppose I want to turn back?"

"There is no turning back, as you have learned. One can only go forward, through the mist called life and into the mist called death. Or one who dares can go beyond. It is your choice."

"But why now?"

"Why not? Does life, as you have seen it, appeal to you?"

"No."

"Do you look forward to death?"

"No."

"Then let us move on."

The Black Skelm carefully broke the dried kernel in half and extended a portion to Harvey.

"Place it on your tongue," he said. "Then swallow slowly."

Harvey knew now that he was dreaming. He knew he was back in the bunk at Kurt's place, and there was nothing to fear—in a moment he'd awake. Meanwhile there was no harm in putting the insignificant morsel on his tongue, no harm in gripping the black man's shrivelled hand as the waves of sensation coursed through him.

Because he was back at Kurt's place now, and as he swallowed *that* too was a dream and he was back in America in Arizona, he was back with Gilda, he was back with the bearded man in France, he was back at the

universities, back at the theatre watching that preposterous cartoon, back here again on the mountain-top meeting the Black Skelm for the first time. No, he was further back than *that*, he was a little boy in Mama's arms, he was crawling, he couldn't even crawl, he was kicking inside a warm darkness, he was only a speck of liquified life, he was nothing, he was—

Everything.

Instantly he leaped forward and upward. The plain faded away beneath him, faded out of focus. He had no eyes to see it with, but he needed no eyes. He was one with immensity and perceived everything. He knew he was still standing—somewhere—and still grasping the black man's hand with his own. But the hand was huge enough to balance a sun on its palm, yet insubstantial enough to feel no pain from its molten mass.

Far below (*yes, it was below, there was still space and dimension, immeasurably transfigured as his body had been transfigured*) the wheeling planets moved in inexorable orbit.

A voice that was not a voice, a mere beat observed in soundlessness, impinged upon his expanded awareness.

"Behold the earth," it said. "A speck, a mite, an errant, inconsequential atom."

Harvey—or that part which remembered Harvey—had a momentary awareness of the old theory of the world as a single cell in the bloodstream of a cosmic monster. But it was not a cell, he perceived, any more than he was now a monster. It was just a speck, as the voice had said.

"Is this what God sees?" he asked.

"I do not know, for I am not yet God. To be God is to act. And I cannot decide. Shall I become God through action?"

"What action is possible?"

"Only one. To destroy this earth. To rearrange the cosmic pattern by removing the atom from being."

"Destroy? Why not save mankind?"

"God cannot save mankind. This I now know. God is great and Man is small. If left alone, Man will destroy himself. We alone can be saved—by becoming one with God."

"I dare not."

"Why? Do you so love the race of Man after what you've seen? Do you love the cesspool in which he wallows, the devices with which he brings about the destruction of others and of himself?"

"But I am a man."

"No longer. You are in Limbo now. Not God, not human. There is no turning back. One must go forward."

"I cannot." Harvey—or the greater being that stood between the stars—turned and faced the black, brooding face—an image of immensity, intangible yet limned and luminous in space.

"Perhaps your life on earth was a sweeter one than mine. You did not see your people perish, and the old ways of nature vanish from the world. You did not skulk in a cave on a mountain-top for endless years, companioned by scavengers—nor feed, like them, on carrion corruption. Your skin was not black."

"You hate the world."

"I am above hate. And above love."

"Pity, then? Compassion?"

"For what? This insignificant speck, crawling with midges that will soon destroy it if left to their own devices?" The soundless voice thundered. "If there is pity, if there is compassion, let it be for one's self. I shall survive, in eternity. There will be other earths—"

"No!"

But the black, brooding face stared down and pursed its lips. Suddenly it blew, and spat. A cloud of ichor issued from the titanic, toothless maw. It spiralled, gathering speed and form as it fell, twisting into a tunneling black cloud.

The cloud encompassed the earth. The earth seemed to be sucked into the spiralling mass; its shell cracked and fire flared forth fitfully. But only for an instant. Then the spittle evaporated into nothingness and what it had encompassed was gone.

Gone? It had never existed.

Harvey—that which was Harvey now—turned and glanced into the great glowing face in the heavens beside him. But it too was gone. Not gone, but growing—growing to such size and at such a speed that it was impossible to perceive even a portion of its features. It was becoming space itself. The Black Skelm was God and had destroyed the earth—

Harvey's mouth opened, swallowing the universe in a soundless scream.

He could not follow the Black Skelm, grow into godhead. He could not go back to an earth which no longer existed, had never existed.

He could only scream, and merge into a swirling nothingness, a funnel that engulfed him without end . . . **THE END**

ABIDE WITH ME

By WILL WORTHINGTON

Miss Forepaugh had always been completely tolerant. . . . Or was it intolerant? . . . It's so hard to tell, nowadays.

MISS Lydia Forepaugh had been born in the village of Framsett. Apart from three years spent in one of the last of the New England Female Academies (Bible study, French, water-color painting and needlework) she had been obliged and disposed to be out of sight of her impeccable street of ancient trees and prim white frame houses but once. Twenty-seven years before it had been necessary to cross the river on the ferry to the City in order to visit the offices of Halsworthy, Johnstone, Johnstone and Pugh, which exemplary firm had undertaken to probate her father's will and handle the estate.

The City was never mentioned by name in Framsett, least of all by Miss Forepaugh, any more than the covered parts of the body were mentioned. Miss Forepaugh and the other members of the Framsett Ladies' Uplift understood in a nebulous way that Framsett somehow drew upon the City for sustenance, but as the principal product of the unsightly industrial community was woolen underwear, even its economic *raison d'etre* removed it from the sphere of permissible conversation. If that were not enough, the City was largely populated by *persons,* by which the Framsett ladies meant persons of shockingly recent immigration to America —swarthy and otherwise oddlooking as often as not, strange and vulgar of speech, and surely given to beliefs and practices best not dwelt upon but surely including drunkenness, licentiousness, libertarianism, probably paganism and vices concerning which no proper person would even speculate. Beyond Framsett—for the City was only another name for the world at large—debauchery and lunacy prevailed, but however deplor-

able, this excused no proper person from the pursuit of the blameless way. Sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof.

But the firm of Halsworthy, Johnstone, Johnstone and Pugh, as though lending credence to the cheerful premise that there is a bit of *yin* in the darkest *yang* (or was it the other way around?) had been handling the estates of propertied families with entire probity and no little shrewdness since the heyday of the Mather brothers, and so Miss Forepaugh had been able to return to her home, on that occasion twenty-seven years before, with some justifiable sense of security, there to resume her pleasant, meticulous life of gardening (in moderation), the canning, sampling and critical comparative study of preserves, the enjoyment (also in moderation) of luncheons and teas with the other Framsett ladies, and interminable needlework. Miss Forepaugh had been working for nearly thirty years on a vast piece of tapestry which, with its frame, occupied one whole end of her parlor. As originally envisioned it was to portray the landing of Miss Forepaugh's ancestors on or near Plymouth Rock, and was to show copper-skinned pagans cringing behind trees and boulders, fearful of encroaching upon the visible aura of righteousness which was to surround the pious invaders. Actually, however, she had yet to depart from her preoccupation with the floral embellishment of the tapestry. She somehow pictured the shores of that primeval America as being carpeted with jonquils, and the execution of these in colored thread was demanding indeed.

It should not be understood, however, that Miss Forepaugh subscribed to a belief in *total* withdrawal from the larger world. She subscribed to a weekly, *The Sunshine Harbinger*, whose editorial policy—a cherubic form of positive thinking—was in entire harmony with her own convictions. The editors of the *Harbinger* held firmly to the idea that the sordid, the distressing —which is to say the *negative* —should never be compounded or dignified by chronicle. Reportage was confined largely to the opening of certain types of buds here and there, garden-club news, bird migrations and sightings, and cheerful but restrained metrical verse submitted by subscribers whose poetic ardor was clearly under control. And if this editorial policy prevented Miss Fore-

paugh and her sisters everywhere from knowing of certain rather alarming developments elsewhere in the world, it was only as it should be and itself a credit to the steadfastness of the publishers.

Neither should it be supposed that the lives of Miss Forepaugh and the other ladies of Framsett were entirely without struggle. So persistent was the threat of invasion by *persons*—underwear workers who wanted to move from their warrens in the City and build modest cottages on the Framsett bank, that the Ladies Uplift had been, for more than five years now, obliged to hold meetings thrice a week instead of only once. Some invaded, however, and the sounds of their laughter down on the river-front (inspired by Bacchus, no doubt) was an offense to the ears of the Framsett Ladies. Indeed, on summer nights when windows and doors were open you could hear them without walking more than eight squares from your own home! One such *person* had even threatened to open something called a *pizza-parlor*, and heaven only knew what unspeakable practices *that* name implied. But the would-be pizza man soon learned that the steely little circle of jasmine tea-drinkers, though made up of frail elderly ladies, was a Power. Had they not successfully resisted the building of a bridge to the City? Had they not also succeeded in oppressing hell out of those *persons* who had come over by seeing to the imposition of unnumbered petty restrictive ordinances (No music after 9 P.M., no fishing from banks within village limits, no unseemly garb in public view, *no wine*)? Miss Forepaugh and the Uplift Ladies *were* Framsett, and if there were no other certainties on the earth, Framsett would endure. And if the City (the darker world without) needed to be mentioned at all, it were meet that it be passed over without lingering, much as one would speak of a vile and unnameable disease.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays it was Miss Forepaugh's habit to visit and inquire after the health of Miss Emily Pondsworth, who had been declining interestingly for some fifty years. It did no harm, after all, to remind oneself that even in Framsett one could not divorce oneself altogether from human suffering. It was on such a day in midsummer, a Tuesday, just as Miss Forepaugh was on the point of leaving her home, bearing a

jar of sour-grass jelly for Poor Miss Pondsworth, that her housekeper, Mrs. Tourette, brought her a letter, which was on the stationery of Halsworthy, Johnstone, Johnstone and Pugh.

Coolly Miss Forepaugh waited until Mrs. Tourette had despaired of her opening the letter in her presence and withdrawn, and only then did she read the letter. It began by assuring her that there was no *immediate* cause for alarm, but that the *Situation* now prevailing in the City had come to enforce certain adjustments in the assessment of her property, and that *They* required that owners of certain major properties and shares thereof present themselves personally for interrogation, as well as bringing certain pertinent documents for registration. Messers. Halsworthy, Johnstone, Johnstone and Pugh expressed heartfelt regret that no way of circumventing this troublesome procedure had offered itself, but in closing they again assured Miss Forepaugh that every effort would be made by them to expedite the matter with the least inconvenience to her and, moreover, that barring unforseen complications there was no immediate cause for distress.

Though quite alone when she read the disturbing letter, Miss Forepaugh permitted herself no display of agitation upon reading it and, in fact, merely put it away in a Chinese incense box on her sewing table and went along to visit Miss Pondsworth. There was nothing to be done, after all, until the morrow.

If Miss Forepaugh was a credit to her own granite-spined forbears on the day of her departure, the same could not be said for the other Ladies of the Uplift, at least in the matter of emotional control. Many dabbed at their eyes with lace hankies when, in a body, they stood at the ferry slip and sang *"Abide With Me"* in hysteria-tinged old voices as Miss Forepaugh mounted to the boat-deck of the craft. (The boat-deck was traditionally Reserved for Ladies and wicker chairs were provided.)

There were many *persons* on the ferry and indeed many appeared to be *blackamoors,* as Miss Forepaugh expressed it, but on closer examination she saw that these *persons* were actually a deep green in color, much like old weatherbeaten bronze. They wore vaguely military-looking uniforms too, and when one of the uniform-

ed *persons* approached and spoke to Miss Forepaugh, she noticed that his jaw opened from side to side instead of up and down. This distorted his consonants rather badly and imparted a distinctly Scandinavian quality to his front vowels.

"Please for sitt-ting" said the *person,* indicating a chair before a small table at one end of the deck. Their grammar was deplorable too, Miss Forepaugh noted mentally, but then what should one expect?

While the *person*—an official of some kind, one supposed, busied himself with some papers on the small table Miss Forepaugh looked around and saw that garish signs had been posted about the deck. The upper half of the signs bore strange characters—quite outlandish, almost Chinesey, and of course quite unreadable by any civilized person. For the benefit of all these *persons* who persisted in intruding upon Framsett, of course. The lower halves of the signs bore the intelligence—if one could call it that—that HAVING O.K. PAPER SOLDIER ASKING PEOPLE NOT BEING HURT—ANSWERING OBEYING ALL GREEN SOLDIER—THANK. COMMANDANT YOU. That argot, presumably, was for the benefit of *persons* too, and was no more than one should expect. After all.

"Name you?" inquired the green person, his voice a deep rasping sound, but polite enough.

"Miss Lydia Lantham Forepaugh."

"You come City since green soldier come?"

"My last visit was in . . . well it was some time ago."

"Rizzon-purpose comeyou?"

"You people should understand that better than I, I should certainly think," snapped Miss Forepaugh, emptying her large knitting bag of its contents—deeds, stock certificates, affidavits of various proprietory kinds and bonds. The green official turned and shouted something at somebody then, facing Miss Forepaugh said, "Not forstanding." His tone was almost apologetic, but it was quite impossible to know if they were smiling, of course.

Up the ladder from the maindeck came a pale, frightened young man—quite white and having a normally horizontal mouth arrangement. He had an harassed and quite literally beaten look, livid marks about his face and one large, ugly mark in the center of his forehead. He wore black-rim-

med glasses which went poorly with the bulky, alien uniform he wore. He smiled feebly.

"My name is . . . *was* Oliver. Harvard. Linguistics. Now I am called *Kh'nen-yogg* —Speaking-frog. In happier days I would have been called an interpreter.

On closer examination Miss Forepaugh saw that the forehead mark was one of the outlandish characters. A brand. This was unfortunate, of course, but Miss Forepaugh had decided that she did not approve of the young man's cringing manner with its disagreeable taint of cynicism. Ignoring the green official, she handed the attorney's letter to Oliver.

"This should explain my purpose in visiting . . . *that place*. I can assure you, *and* your employer here, that I find the entire matter a quite insufferable imposition."

Oliver spoke, haltingly and with visible pain, to the green official. The language had all of the disagreeable, vulgar qualities of every foreign language Miss Forepaugh had ever heard, not even excluding the debased logging-camp French of the late husband of her housekeeper, Mrs. Tourette.

Attuning her ears to more distant sounds, the better to remove herself in spirit at least from the disagreeable conversation between the Harvard student and the green official, Miss Forepaugh could just hear the faint quavering notes of "Abide with Me" astern, and from the other bank ahead, what was unmistakably the sound of screaming . . . as of many people screaming at once. Quickly and with the facility of long habit she tuned out that sound and redirected her attention to the green official before her.

"This go long you for speak and protect," he said, indicating Oliver with a contemptuous thumb.

"I shan't require an escort," she said, summoning New England frost to her speech. "I am quite able to care for myself."

"It's best not to protest, Miss," said Oliver, looking anxiously at the green man then turning back to Miss Forepaugh.

"One discerns that you learned that lesson with rather more facility than is entirely seemly in a Harvard man," said Miss Forepaugh, with the desired result that Oliver kept communication to an absolute minimum thereafter. It was probably the ill-fitting foreign uniform that made Miss Fore-

paugh take the position she did.

There were many separate plumes of smoke rising here and there in the city, and there were sounds of girders being torn and masonry falling. Great metal disks, apparently supported by nothing, hovered above the buildings, and from these hung hooks, claws and pear-shaped weights on cables.

"They can't stand roofs," advanced Oliver timidly. "They're tearing off all roofs. They need lots of sunlight."

Miss Forepaugh did not deign to reply.

On the pier stood a group of white-skinned people, or yellow or pink or brown, some of them. At all events they were not green. They were naked and standing so still that they might have been frozen. When a green soldier prodded one of them with a sharp object and the naked victim toppled like a store-manikin, it was evident that they *were* rigid. Whatever the reason for it, or however the victims had been brought to this condition, it was, Miss Forepaugh decided, a most undignified spectacle.

A smaller metal disk came floating along the street by itself, about two feet from the cobblestones, and when Oliver barked a cryptic command it stopped for them. Two rubbery, mushroom-shaped seats extruded themselves from the upper surface of the thing and Miss Forepaugh and her escort seated themselves. Oliver barked another command and the disk swept along the street noiselessly. The ride was quite comfortable, but Miss Forepaugh accepted the experience without apparent interest or curiosity. It was one of the many commendable features of *The Sunshine Harbinger* that it did not annoy or disconcert its readership with puerile reports on modern gadgetry. Neither that journal nor its readership acknowledged technological advancement since the development of the steam-engine.

There were many sights to be seen along their route. Once they were stopped by a green soldier and Oliver spoke to him and showed him a sheaf of papers. Huge spherical machines with tripod legs had been set up at many intersections, and beams of irridescent light would dart from them sometimes, causing fleeing people to freeze in their tracks or topple over like lead soldiers. Squads of green soldiers could be seen entering houses and shops, or leaving these buildings carrying ob-

jects of all kinds including girls—both struggling and frozen. The sounds of screaming and of splintering glass and falling masonry blended to form a constant sound which could be relegated to the background of thought. One must do this in cities or go mad.

The offices of Halsworthy, Johnstone, Johnstone and Pugh were situated in a solid old building on the town square. When Miss Forepaugh and her escort skimmed into the square it looked as though some sort of carnival were in progress. The first spectacle to meet their eyes there was reminiscent of a Chinese Dragon Festival, but when Oliver urged Miss Forepaugh to look the other way, and of course she didn't, she saw that a group of green men in white smocks were in fact unreeling a man's entrails and exclaiming happily over their findings with tape-measures and calipers. Only after ascertaining this and adding the observation to her list of convictions concerning the City did Miss Forepaugh avert her eyes.

In the center of the square the green men, with the aid of men of more usual hue in shackles, were applying green paint to a monolith which must have been two hundred feet high. It was an . . . *oh my gracious!* Miss Forepaugh's memory leapt back to her schooldays when, gasping and giggling in spite of themselves, she and her schoolmates had turned the pages of a forbidden book on anatomy. From the *oh-my-gracious,* too, Miss Forepaugh quickly averted her eyes, and as quickly, her mind.

Green sentries stood at the door of the lawyers' offices, and papers were displayed again by Oliver before they were allowed to go in. The girl at the reception desk had marks of violence on her face, and also of great bitterness. She looked at Miss Forepaugh very coldly during introductions, and at Oliver not at all. "Mr. Pugh can see you immediately," she said, and as they moved to enter the inner office she added. "Everything will be just simply *dandy,* Miss Forepaugh, just simply *peachy-dandy.*"

Miss Forepaugh made a mental note to complain about the young woman's insolence, but otherwise dismissed the matter.

Mr. Pugh sat not at his own mahogany desk but at a makeshift affair of empty beer-crates and herring boxes. At his former desk sat a green

officer—quite high-ranking to judge by the blaze of metal devices on his uniform. Mr. Pugh rose and extended his hand to Miss Forepaugh, and began uttering apologetic little squeaks immediately.

"We are dreadfully sorry to put you to this inconvenience, dear Miss Forepaugh, but you know how it is since . . ."

His eyes flickered sideways towards the green officer.

"May we dispense with these details without delay?" demanded Miss Forepaugh, thrusting her sheaf of deeds and other papers at Mr. Pugh.

"Of course. Of course," he said, taking the papers and handing them to the green officer.

"Now, my dear Miss Forepaugh, there are a few routine questions we are obliged to answer. A nuisance, I know, but a quite necessary formality."

"Get on with it," she snapped. Mr. Pugh drew a printed list from a pile of papers, and as he studied this Miss Forepaugh noticed that the green officer was glancing through her own papers in a perfunctory way, marking them with a cachet and placing them under a beam of light which projected from the ceiling.

"Now then, Miss Forepaugh," began Pugh, "you have no weapons or radio transmission equipment in your home, have you?"

"If we are to play foolish games, Mr. Pugh, my time is . . ."

"Of course not," said Pugh, making a mark on the list. "Only a formality, my dear Miss Forepaugh. Now then, as to occupation policy . . . Have you any complaints concerning the present administration of public matters in your community?"

"Of course not."

"And then the matter of . . . well . . . *labor* policy. Do you accept the new system of labor procurement . . . that is, well you *are* a shareowner in the mills, you know."

"What do you mean *labor* policy?"

"Well . . ." and Mr. Pugh managed a strangled little chuckle. "Not *all* of the people now working in the mills are doing so on a *completely voluntary* basis, you understand, Miss Forepaugh."

Miss Forepaugh drew herself up, and yet farther up. "Matters of this nature are scarcely within my province, Mr. Pugh."

"Of course, of course," said Pugh, almost giggling with what must have been relief.

"I should think, she said,

"that the main concern is that the mills continue to operate."

"Just so," said Pugh. "Now then, a question about organizations,"

"I belong, as you know, to the Framsett Ladies' Uplift."

"Oh yes, of course." With this, Mr. Pugh turned to the green officer and spoke to him in the alien language.

"I have just explained to the most excellent commandant that the Framsett Ladies' Uplift is Framsett, in a very real sense, and that *you*, my dear Miss Forepaugh, are in an equally real sense the Framsett Ladies' Uplift. Now your organization has never, of course, advocated any form of . . . resistance . . ."

"Of course *not!*" blazed Miss Forepaugh, displaying what she would otherwise have considered unseemly emotion. "We have never, never, never been in favor of trouble of any kind, sir."

"Of course not. Of course not. Dear me!" Mr. Pugh then moved his well-chewed pencil down the printed list. "Oh there are many questions here —troublesome details. How you feel about confiscation of virgins for use by the troops, confiscation of persons for scientific research purposes, all of which come under the broad heading of what we call *The Code of Kh'aug*. Now if you care to read these details . . . register any specific objections . . ."

"I am sure," said Miss Forepaugh impatiently, "that what goes on in the City is no concern of mine and is certainly of no interest either negatively or affirmatively."

At this the green officer bowed from the waist.

Back in her own parlor, Miss Forepaugh dismissed Mrs. Tourette's solicitous inquiries with a wave of the hand and ordered a tray with tea and macaroons brought in. When the tea-tray was set before her she inhaled the delicate aroma of the jasmine flowers in the infusion and allowed her eyes and fingertips to savor the teacup itself. It was fine old English china, very delicate, white with the faintest color of age and adorned with tiny, perfectly executed flowers. Jonquils, they were.

"Really *nice* things always endure," she said to herself. Such artifacts as the tea-set always reaffirmed this conviction for her somehow. She was very proud of her chinaware. It had been the gift of some British general and had been in her family for more than three hundred years. **THE END**

Everything changes, in the gyrations of Time, except hate and love and fear and faith. And a man can find himself even

IN THE CIRCLE OF NOWHERE

By IRVING E. COX, Jr.

PRETEND, yes. Let them think they had succeeded. Anything, so he could get away. The hard core of scientific reality was still intact. They hadn't destroyed it. Mora-Ta-Kai still believed in the old science, as firmly as they had tried to make him believe in—this.

"On the whole, we've made remarkable progress, Mr. Smith." The doctor was smiling and shaking his hand. Smith was the name they had given him. Mora-Ta-Kai had used his own only once, in the first shock of panic, before he understood the detailed internal structure of the nightmare.

"It's all very clear now," Mora-Ta-Kai said, because he knew he was expected to. "There is the Conrad Hilton and the Blackstone Hotel, and beyond them I can see Lake Michigan."

The doctor's car slid smoothly into the stream of Michigan Avenue traffic. "Excellent, Smith! We still have the amnesia to take care of, but we've conquered the other thing." The doctor pulled at his pipe, his face glowing with satisfaction. "You've earned your vacation, Smith."

"Have you arranged for me to have a room of my own?"

"Everything you asked for. Relax; enjoy yourself. The amnesia may clear up of its own accord."

"This Mrs. Armbruster—is she—"

"A personal friend of mine. You won't have any trouble. She'll leave you alone, or talk

with you by the hour—whatever you ask."

And make a record of everything I do, Mora-Ta-Kai thought bitterly; but the expression on his face did not change. He must do nothing now to betray himself. It made very little difference what Mrs. Armbruster chose to set down in her case study; she would never have an opportunity to make her report. All Mora-Ta-Kai needed was a room of his own, a place to work; and the doctor had promised him that. The material he had to use was available everywhere. His belief in the old science was not strong enough to restore reality; but he could at least use it to sweep the universe of the nightmare into oblivion.

The doctor's car rolled to a stop before a comfortable, brick house, decorously withdrawn from the street behind a mask of shrubs which partly concealed the high, wire fence. Mrs. Armbruster met Mora-Ta-Kai at the door—a pleasant, gracious, gray-haired lady dressed in white. A nurse! Mora-Ta-Kai had merely exchanged one form of imprisonment for another, slightly more subtle.

But they kept their promise. Mrs. Armbruster gave him a room of his own. When the door was shut, he sat down slowly on the bed. In the glass above the bureau he saw his reflection: tall, gaunt, hollow-cheeked. His skin was a dusky, reddish-brown. His glossy, black hair was brushed back from his forehead, emphasizing the wasted, skull-like shape of his face. His black eyes were enormous, glittering pools of ebony.

It was his clothing that held his attention, that fantastic costume which nearly covered his whole body: a white shirt, open at the throat; brown slacks; hard leather shoes that hurt his feet. He would have ripped off the shirt, but he dared not. He must conform to the taboos of the White Savages. Only then would they allow him the freedom he needed.

The bedroom window was open. Outside Mora-Ta-Kai saw the rows of green buds marching on the bare branches of the trees, the young spears of sprouting bulbs breaking through the black, garden soil. The air sang with the fresh-earth smell of spring.

Spring! The word hit him with the force of a warclub. The nightmare had started in the dead of winter. He had

been trapped in this weird dream for three months, maybe longer. Three months ago the nightmare had started. . .

Mora-Ta-Kai was quarreling with Lassai. He couldn't remember why. Lassai was his squaw; he loved her very much. He had just returned from a trip across the Eastern Sea to slave plantations. It should have been a joyous homecoming. But something came between them — the memory was vague, overlaid by the powerful sorcery of the dream.

Pyrn-Ute had been there, too. Ten months before, Mora-Ta-Kai had won Lassai from him; now Pyrn-Ute was back, his arm draped around Lassai's shoulder. He sneered at Mora-Ta-Kai. Seething with anger, Mora-Ta-Kai flung out of the house. Snow was falling. A crying wind swept in from the lake, heaping snow in drifts along the walk.

(Why had they quarreled? Mora-Ta-Kai probed desperately into the tormented recesses of his mind, but the memory eluded him.)

He strode in long strides over the slippery walks. The streets were snarled with vehicles, trapped by the sudden storm. At every crossing Mora-Ta-Kai had to pick his way through a mass of stalled moto-canoes. Only the new degravs were moving. They rode comfortably above the turmoil, driven by their whirring roto-paddles. Mora-Ta-Kai observed the performance of the machines critically, and with satisfaction. The degrav was his own invention; this storm was its first real test in a commercial situation.

The quarrel with Lassai and Pyrn-Ute crowded his mind, poisoning everything else. He saw the bulk of the Council House, rising out of the gray mist of the storm, and the beckoning lights of the Teepee Room. Mora-Ta-Kai needed a drink; not one, but a dozen. If he made himself roaring drunk, he could wash the memory of the quarrel away. He turned to cross through the traffic.

A noise-warner blared behind him. He heard the grind of wheels, the skid of safety grips on the slush ice. He dodged. For a moment, a shiver of sharp pain lashed his spine. The snow, the traffic, the light from the Teepee Room swirled together in a tortuous pattern.

Then everything was gone. Instead of the Council House, a different structure rose before him. The letters on the building were strange—fool-

ish marks he had never seen before — yet Mora - Ta - Kai knew and read them!

The building was called the Conrad Hilton.

Mora-Ta-Kai had never before seen any of the peculiar vehicles which cluttered the street. Yet he recognized them all. He saw the faces of the people: White Savages! White Savages walking the streets of—of— Their name for the place was Chicago. Mora-Ta-Kai knew it, just as he was able to read their printed words.

In terror he began to run, fighting his way back to reality. But the nightmare closed on his mind. Hands reached out of the depths of his fear—the pale hands of white Savages. They dragged him down deep into a black, choking chaos, down into a world of quivering pain.

And out of it they brought him to this—the pretense of conformity. From winter to spring, from one sort of prison to another. But Mora-Ta-Kai could end the dream. The old science was more powerful than the sorcery of the White Savages.

He opened the bedroom door and called Mrs. Armbruster.

A young, yellow - haired squaw came into the hall. "Mrs. Armbruster is in the sun room. Can I help? I'm Lydia Rand, Mrs. Armbruster's assistant."

He stood staring at the woman. She resembled someone he knew, but he couldn't remember. Not Lassai; Lassai's hair was long and black, braided in a coil at the back of her head. Lydia Rand was like another female, a woman somehow associated with the beginning of the nightmare. The ghost of a new memory tugged at his mind. But it eluded him.

"I need some things," he said.

"Give me a list, Mr. Smith, and I'll—"

"No, I have to buy them myself."

"You came to us for a rest." She put her hand gently on his arm. "If there's any work that needs to be done, leave it to us." She smiled at him warmly. The White Savages had all been kind and attentive; and for that Mora-Ta-Kai was grateful. The nightmare was terror enough; if he had peopled it with real plantation barbarians—he shuddered.

"I'm not permitted to leave the house?" he asked. "Is that it?" His voice choked. He had conformed; he had done all

they asked. Surely, now, he would be able to escape!

Lydia Rand looked steadily into his eyes. "In your case, it might be a good thing," she decided. "But I'll have to go with you."

Mora-Ta-Kai sighed with relief. She would be no real hindrance. If she were with him, he would not be able to buy the pure elements he needed, because that would arouse curiosity, but he knew the chemicals were incorporated in common compounds—tooth-powder, cosmetics, patent medicines.

(How did he know? The knowledge was a part of the dream, like his facility in using their language. He thought in terms of his own semantic symbols; but he spoke and read theirs.)

Lydia Rand walked with him to a drugstore a block from the house. She made no comment when he bought the assortment of drugs. From the point of view of her science, they were harmless. However, three vital items presented something of a problem: the copper wire, the foil aluminum, and the magnets. The aluminum he found in a roll. In that form it was sold to White Savage squaws for wrapping left-over foods. The copper wire and the magnets were both available as parts of toys.

"What in the world do you want with these things?" Lydia asked.

"I—these seem to be—" He was in a panic, without an excuse.

Then she helped him out. "They're familiar to you, Mr. Smith? Good! Perhaps you were a toy manufacturer before you—before you came to us. By all means buy them. They may help restore your memory."

They paid for his purchases and left the store. She put her arm through his and they walked back to the rest home. It was dusk and long shadows fell on the street. The sky overhead flamed scarlet with the light of the setting sun.

Lydia laughed pleasantly. "It's a good thing you didn't send me out with a list of what you wanted, Mr. Smith." She gestured at the bulky package under his arm. "Such a conglomeration! Anyone would think you were going to play around with witchcraft or sorcery."

He looked at her squarely. The red blaze of the sun touched her face, like the light of a blazing fire. Her hair was transformed into a fragile crown of gold; her eyes were

lost in shadow. He recognized her, then. The memory leaped into clarity, against a background of fear.

Lydia Rand was the Sorceress.

He knew now why he had quarreled with Lassai; he remembered the real beginning of the dream.

Weak with fear, he went back to his room. He shut the door, but there was no way he could lock it. He put his package, unopened, on the bureau and dropped limply on the bed. The full pattern emerged from his memory, complete and unbroken.

The beginning of the dream: not the sudden winter storm; not the ritual of the plantation savages across the Eastern Sea; not even the chant of the Sorceress. The dream began in the eccentric scientific theorizing of his own mind. . . .

"You're joking," Pyrn-Ute said.

"No; I've already asked for leave and bought my ticket," Mora-Ta-Kai responded. "I'm going on the *Iroquois* this afternoon."

"But why? You've no reason to go out to the plantations. You're a scientist, a chosen brave—"

"I'm going because I am a scientist. I have a theory; I want to prove it."

"You're a number-man, not a tribalist!"

"The same method is used in both fields."

"Don't tell me your fantastic notion of equality—"

"Red superiority is a myth. Given our opportunities, our environment, the White Savages could have equaled our civilization."

This was too much for Pyrn-Ute. His thin, sardonic face seethed with laughter. It was the reaction Mora-Ta-Kai expected.

"The White Savages are slaves, Mora-Ta-Kai," Pyrn-Ute said. "They always have been. They don't have the mentality to be anything else."

"Slaves only because a quirk of history caused our war canoes to stray across the Eastern Sea. We discovered the dark continent of the White Savages when they still lived in scattered, stone-walled villages, savage tribes constantly at war with each other. Suppose our canoes had arrived two centuries later? In that time, if the Whites had been left alone, they might have learned to live together as one nation, as we did ourselves."

"Oh, I know the radicals trot that nonsense out when-

ever they find a willing audience. They tell us the yellow-hairs are noble, beautiful people." Pyrn-Ute's lip curled in disgust. "I've seen the plantations. I've seen the filth and the disease; the barbaric rituals!"

"Our basic science was stolen from them, Pyrn-Ute."

"By accident; and we improved it so—"

"Our explorers brought back the number system, the astrology, and the philosophy of science which an earlier culture of White Savages had developed."

"But they had forgotten it themselves."

"Nevertheless, the knowledge was originally theirs."

"In a way, I suppose, we owe their remote ancestors a debt, but that doesn't mean the savages of today. Neither history nor the ranting of the radicals can explain away one obvious fact. At the time when we discovered the dark continent, our races stood on equal footing. They even had the advantage, because the science was theirs. Their land was as rich as ours and as fertile. Our two races started at the same place, from scratch. Yet only the Red Man learned how to build a civilization. The answer, Mora-Ta-Kai, is obvious: we have superior mental ability."

"I think I can prove otherwise."

"How?"

"I want to visit the plantation stations and examine the records on station help. We've taught them to use our language and numbers the way we do. I think I can demonstrate that their rate of learning is no slower than ours."

"But the station help is less than one per cent of the population. They're chosen for their superiority—"

"Because we've made them seem so by teaching them what we know."

Pyrn-Ute chuckled. "You've never seen the slave plantations. It'll be different when you stand face to face with the truth. Are you going alone?"

"Lassai isn't the kind of squaw who can rough it on a plantation. She'll stay here. I may want to push into the interior, you know."

"You've been married for three moons, Mora-Ta-Kai. You have strong convictions, if you'll leave your bride so soon. But no sense."

"It's good sense if I can prove—"

"Who cares? When you come back, you'll write a

learned monograph for the tribalist files; they'll put it in the archives and forget it."

"I won't let the issue die like that. Pyrn-Ute, our system of slave plantations has to be revised. Think what we might accomplish, if our two races could work together in equality."

"Follow the implications of equality to its logical end, Mora-Ta-Kai. Then ask yourself this: would you let your own sister become the squaw of a White Savage?"

"Intermarriage has nothing to do with it. The two races can live together, as brothers, without it."

Pyrn-Ute held out his hand. "You have enough good sense to change your mind after you see the yellow-hairs in their native setting. How long will you be away?"

"Six moons."

"Enjoy yourself. I'll look in on Lassai occasionally. By the way, this new invention of yours, the degrav unit—"

"I've ironed out all the bugs, I think. They're going into commercial production at once. If you will, Pyrn-Ute, I'd like you to handle the royalty contracts."

"Of course."

"If anything like an emergency comes up, contact me at the slave station on Angle Island. I'll make that my headquarters."

Two hours later Mora-Ta-Kai set sail in the *Iroquois*. It was an enormous sky freighter on the food run, making tri-weekly trips between the Angle Island Plantations and the Lake Cities. Mora-Ta-Kai sat in the cabin as the sphere shot up from the field. Below him were the five lakes, lying like a giant hand placed upon the heart of the continent. Girdling the shores of the lakes were the towers of the interlocked Lake Cities.

As the sphere moved eastward, the pattern of cities on the earth below did not change. No mountain, no valley, no river bank stood unoccupied. The continent was one vast city, teeming with activity. It was Mora-Ta-Kai's civilization, crowded, complex, dynamic. Built solidly on scientific knowledge, the culture seemed eternally enduring. Yet its foundation was riddled with the slow, moral decay of slavery. The food, the heavy labor, the key resources of Mora-Ta-Kai's world were produced by White Savage slaves on the plantations across the Eastern Sea.

The *Iroquois* was an old

ship. It had neither the speed nor the comfort of the modern pleasure liners which sailed the routes to the Ethiopian Republic or to the Shogun Union across the Western Sea. It was strange, Mora-Ta-Kai thought, that the black men of Ethiopia should live so much closer to the continent of the White Savages, yet practice so little racial hatred. The Ethiopian Republic had encouraged the growth of free colonies of whites within the republic. In some areas whites and blacks had intermarried, with no loss of social status to the black man.

In ten hours the *Iroquois* settled into the landing crib on Angle Island. Precision-trained natives swarmed into the hatches and the job of loading foodstuffs aboard the sphere began immediately.

This was the first time Mora-Ta-Kai had seen the yellow-hairs. They wore gray, crudely woven tunics; their feet and arms were bare. When he came close to them, he had to admit that, in one particular at least, Pyrn-Ute had been right. The White Savages were filthy. Vermin crawled in their matted hair. Their bodies were covered with sores and scabs.

When he went to the plantation station, Mora-Ta-Kai found the native station personnel somewhat more attracive. They were relatively clean. They wore cheap imitations of the Red Man's civilized costume—leather loin cloths, jeweled chest straps, soft sandals. But they had no pride, no bearing. Their manner was abject, beaten. Once more it seemed that Pyrn-Ute had been right. How could such fawning things be considered the equals of the free Red Man?

Mora-Ta-Kai believed that slavery had made the whites adopt the attitudes of slaves. If they were born in freedom and reared in freedom, they would be no different from their masters. He was convinced of it because he knew that the dependence of the Red Man on the slaves was inexorably destroying civilization, weakening the incentive and the ambition of his people.

Mora-Ta-Kai doggedly assembled his data from the educational records of the station personnel. For five moons he traveled from one plantation to another, collecting statistics. He made three excursions to the interior stations.

The Red Men who were

station directors gave him no help. They derided the idea of racial equality. The White Savages themselves were afraid when Mora-Ta-Kai tried to talk to them. They would take his orders, yes; they would wait on his wants. But simply to sit and chat with a Red Man was an unheard of violation of established relations with their masters.

At the end of the fifth moon Mora-Ta-Kai sat in his room at the Angle Island station tentatively outlining the report he would make when he returned to the Lake Cities. The regular station personnel were in the recreation room, watching a command performance of a native ritual. Many of the Red Men were very drunk. Mora-Ta-Kai had discovered that many station directors were never sober.

His door creaked open. A yellow-hair slid into the room. Mora-Ta-Kai felt sure he recognized the man, although it was hard to distinguish one savage from another.

"The Red Master is busy? He not wish to be disturbed?"

Mora-Ta-Kai patiently set his papers aside. "I always have time to talk with friends." He studied the white face carefully. "Your name is— Harold?"

"I am proud you remember me, master." The yellow-hair glanced at the desk. "You are making a study of my people; that, too, gives me pride."

"I wish I had more information, Harold."

"The heart of the White Savage cannot be found in a plantation house."

"But where else—"

"Would you be willing, Red master, to visit a Sorceress?"

Mora-Ta-Kai laughed uneasily. "I've heard the legends, Harold; but you're an intelligent man and surely you don't believe the sorcery-makers really exist!"

"The Red Man has never seen one."

"And you have, Harold?"

"The Sorceress says, Red master, that you are honest."

Mora-Ta-Kai stood up and drew his pleated animal hide around his naked shoulders, for the night was cold. "Would you take me to a Sorceress, Harold?"

"She has sent the call; I obey. But, master—" The yellow-hair hesitated, wringing his hands nervously. "There is danger."

"I will be armed, Harold."

"No physical danger, master; but to the soul. Your protection must be honesty, as true and unwavering as fire flaming in a deep well."

Mora-Ta-Kai suppressed a smile. This was the typical superstitious mumbo - jumbo of savages everywhere. The ancient ritual of his own people had been no different. "We can go now, Harold," he said. "The others are busy downstairs; we'll not disturb them."

"This is as the Sorceress arranged it, master."

Mora-Ta-Kai followed Harold away from the plantation house. They slipped past the noisy, cluttered slave pens in the forest. And then the Red Man felt the first pang of fear. The night seemed alive with unseen things. Frost lay heavy on the ground, in white shadows, which leered at Mora-Ta-Kai like grinning masks. The darkness pulsed with a clamorous sound. There was a slow rhythm to his fear, like a heartbeat.

In the distance they saw a fire glowing among the trees. Naked white men swirled in a circle around the flame, their bodies contorted in a ritual dance. Yet they made no sound. Mora-Ta-Kai heard nothing but the muted beat of a skin-drum and the low-keyed melody of a reed pipe.

The fear exploded in his mind. The feeling was sensuous, hypnotic. Vaguely he wondered if they had somehow drugged him when he ate that evening. Despite his civilization, his training as a scientist, he was powerless to hold the fear back. The White Savages had wiped away his superiority and reduced him to their level. This, then, was equality!

He would have gone back, but he could not.

He followed Harold to the fire. He saw the Sorceress standing above the flames, her arms raised to the night sky, her pale face red in the glare. His fear dissolved into pure terror. . .

Mora-Ta-Kai felt the same terror as he sat weak and exhausted on the bed in Mrs. Armbruster's house. The Sorceress had made this dream. She had created the nightmare world and condemned him to it: this strange world where a city called Chicago took the place of the beautiful Lake Cities, where an ugly thing called the Conrad Hilton stood on the site of the Council House. Why? Mora-Ta-Kai did not know. His intention had been to help the White Savages, yet they had destroyed him.

He knew only this: he could wipe out the thing the Sorceress had made.

This distortion existed only in his mind. The Sorceress

had put it there. But she had not entirely destroyed the real substance of himself. Mora-Ta-Kai was a scientist and his scientific knowledge was intact, unharmed.

The universe of the Sorceress, perhaps as a result of her scientific ignorance, had physical laws different from reality, less complex. In the structure of the dream world, mechanical degravitation was a mathematical absurdity. But in the real science which Mora-Ta-Kai knew, degravs had been popular toys for centuries. Mora-Ta-Kai himself had invented a practical application of the degrav to commercial transportation.

To end the dream, he would apply the science he knew to the distortion. He would set up a degrav core which would activate the planet itself. The dream universe, held together by a clock-like balance of opposing gravities, would fall in upon itself. Perhaps, in the process, Mora-Ta-Kai would also destroy himself. He didn't know. At least he would escape, if only to oblivion.

He got up and opened his package of drugs and toys. He laid the material out on the bed, carefully separating the items he needed. He spread the aluminum sheet in the correct pattern on the floor and began to compute the angle of magnetization.

There was a knock on the door.

Mora-Ta-Kai's throat went cold with panic. He could not hide the aluminum. The sheet was too fragile. If he wrinkled the surface, the distortion angle would be too complex for him to compute without a calculator.

The door swung open. Lydia Rand came into his room.

"Your dinner's ready, Mr. Smith," she said cheerfully. "But if you'd rather eat in here—" Then she saw the aluminum. "What is it, Mr. Smith?"

"A—a toy," he muttered.

"And you want to build it?"

"I—I've made one before."

"Then you're beginning to remember!" Her eyes glowed with pleasure. When he saw her face in the light, he realized that her resemblance to the Sorceress had been superficial. All the yellow-hairs looked so much alike. "Could you tell me about it, Mr. Smith?"

He had recovered poise enough to lie. "It's very vague, like a shadow in my mind. I thought it was something I remembered." He shrugged, and pretended to lose interest.

"I'm wrong, of course; it's rather foolish, isn't it?"

"I'm sure it isn't. Please finish it. It may help you find yourself. You stay here and work on it; I'll bring you a sandwich and a glass of milk."

She was gone again. With trembling fingers he went back to building the degrav core. Lydia Rand was very naive. It had not occurred to her that his innocent toy could sweep her world into oblivion. Slowly Mora-Ta-Kai stopped and sat down on the bed. They had given him nothing but kindness, these dream people. Was it worth destroying their world, even on the chance that he might regain his own?

All reality, all truth were subjective phenomenon. To the doctor, to Lydia Rand, to all the White Savages, this dream was real; his was the abnormality. Universe upon universe, the Sorceress had said, as infinite as the complexity of human thought. . .

The black night, the throbbing, primitive forest closed in on Mora-Ta-Kai. He stood looking into the eyes of the Sorceress, sapphire orbs framed by the wild filigree of her wind-blown, yellow hair.

"Mora-Ta-Kai, you come among us on a quest, and the thing you seek is within yourself. All possible worlds lie dormant in the soul of every man, all possible good and all possible evil. Take my hand, Mora-Ta-Kai, and look with me into the fire. We go on a journey, you and I, a long journey in the circle of nowhere, to other worlds and other faces—"

The lilting chant faded, like the dying whisper of a summer wind, as he took her hand. Her fingers were light, fragile, the feather touch of a ghost; yet they held him like bands of steel. He looked into the fire.

Like the turning pages of an open book, Mora-Ta-Kai saw the kaleidoscope of possible time. He saw yellow people, who lived across the Western Sea, stray from the drive that had created the Shogun Union, and sink slowly into the stalemate of a decayed dictatorship. He saw the proud Republic of Ethiopia lost in savagery, splintered into a hundred helpless tribes, enslaved by other men. And he saw the white Savages rise up and claim the world. He saw them flow in a restless flood into the continent of the Red Man. Mora-Ta-Kai's people were debased, debauched, cheated and mur-

dered, driven slowly into extinction, while a proud culture of White Savages was built on the face of the land.

The picture vanished. The fire died. Mora-Ta-Kai was alone in the clearing with the yellow-haired Sorceress.

"What does the vision mean?" he asked her.

"Meaning you must find for yourself, just as the things you saw came from your own mind, Mora-Ta-Kai. The worlds are all there, universe upon universe, as infinite as the complexity of human thought. I have shown you how to reach them. At another time, you will find the way for yourself."

She turned and disappeared into the forest.

A week later Mora-Ta-Kai took the *Iroquois* back to the Lake Cities. He published his report through the tribalist institute. He called it *The Myth*. The opening sentence set his theme, "All men are brothers." The monograph caused a mild sensation; it was bought and read like a piece of pornographic literature.

But Pyrn-Ute and Lassai met Mora-Ta-Kai with rage and revulsion.

"I suppose you took a squaw among the yellow-hairs!" Lassai cried. "Filthy, vermin-ridden beasts. And you prefer them to me!"

"Of course I don't, Lassai. Even if I had done that, it wouldn't matter. The idea of brotherhood—"

"Don't touch me!" She fled to Pyrn-Ute, and he put his arm around her shoulder.

"Brotherhood," Pyrn-Ute said in his aloof, sardonic way, "is a very dangerous concept, Mora-Ta-Kai. We use it among ourselves. We always have. But to suggest that we include—"

Suddenly Mora-Ta-Kai understood what the Sorceress had meant; he read the fire pictures. "It was brotherhood that made us strong," he said. "Nothing else. When our war canoes first discovered the continent of White Savages, the Red Men were a united people. We had learned how to live together in peace. The White Savages had not. It was not their science that made us great, but the thing we were ourselves!"

"This I know, Mora-Ta-Kai: the idea of brotherhood that you have given us would destroy the world."

"If we are so weak, we deserve destruction!"

Mora-Ta-Kai stormed angrily out of the house, into the winter storm. Five min-

utes later he had lost his universe. The chant of the Sorceress sang at him: other worlds, other faces—a journey in the circle of nowhere.

He sat on the bed looking at his degrav machine; and he knew now that he would never complete it.

Lydia Rand returned and put a sandwich and a glass of milk on his bureau.

"You haven't finished your toy, Mr. Smith!"

"I have no reason to. In this universe or in that, all men are brothers—the rest doesn't matter."

She sat down beside him and took his hand. "You were saying that when we brought you in, Mr. Smith. Have you remembered anything else?"

"All of it." He began to laugh. Very slowly he picked up the sheet of aluminum and crumpled it into a tight ball.

"What were you making?"

"A degravitation core."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Smith. We know better than that, don't we? Degravitation is a physical impossibilty."

"In your world, yes, and to Mr. Smith, yes. But in the circle of nowhere, there is a time, there is a place— Sit beside me, Miss Rand, and I will tell you about it."

As he talked he embraced the dream and the dream became real. Lassai, Pyrn-Ute, the White Savages: they were gone, exorcised from his mind like demons. Here, in this new reality, he was a Red Man in a culture of White Savages; but they treated him kindly and with understanding. He had found the thing he sought in the forest; the Sorceress had shown him the way to brotherhood. He asked for nothing else.

THE END



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DIPLOMAT-AT-ARMS

By KEITH LAUMER

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

Retief had just one job on Northroyal—to save the galaxy from madness and war. So with a frayed cloak and an old horse and a packet in his saddlebags—not to mention blood, guts and brains—he set out.

THE cold white sun of Northroyal glared on pale dust and vivid colors in the narrow raucous street. Retief rode slowly, unconscious of the huckster's shouts, the kaleidoscope of smells, the noisy milling crowd. His thoughts were on events of long ago on distant worlds; thoughts that set his features in narrow-eyed grimness. His bony, powerful horse, unguided, picked his way carefully, with flaring nostrils, wary eyes alert in the turmoil.

The mount sidestepped a darting gamin and Retief leaned forward, patted the sleek neck. The job had some compensations, he thought; it was good to sit on a fine horse again, to shed the grey business suit . . .

A dirty-faced man pushed a fruit cart almost under the animal's head; the horse shied, knocked over the cart. At once a muttering crowd began to gather around the heavy- shouldered grey-haired man. He reined in and sat scowling, an ancient brown cape over his shoulders, a covered buckler slung at the side of the worn saddle, a scarred silver-worked claymore strapped across his back in the old cavalier fashion.

Retief hadn't liked this job when he had first heard of it. He had gone alone on madman's errands before, but that had been long ago—a phase of his career that should have been finished. And the information he had turned up in his background research had broken his professional detachment. Now the locals were

trying an old tourist game on him; ease the outlander into a spot, then demand money . . .

Well, Retief thought, this was as good a time as any to start playing the role; there was a hell of a lot here in the quaint city of Fragonard that needed straightening out.

"Make way, you rabble!" he roared suddenly, "or by the chains of the sea-god I'll make a path through you!" He spurred the horse; neck arching, the mount stepped daintily forward.

The crowd made way reluctantly before him. "Pay for the merchandise you've destroyed," called a voice.

"Let peddlers keep a wary eye for their betters," snorted the man loudly, his eye roving over the faces before him. A tall fellow with long yellow hair stepped squarely into his path.

"There are no rabble or peddlers here," he said angrily. "Only true cavaliers of the Clan Imperial . . ."

The mounted man leaned from his saddle to stare into the eyes of the other. His seamed brown face radiated scorn. "When did a true cavalier turn to commerce? If you were trained to the Code you'd know a gentleman doesn't soil his hands with penny-grubbing, and that the Emperor's highroad belongs to the mounted knight. So clear your rubbish out of my path, if you'd save it."

"Climb down off that nag," shouted the tall young man, reaching for the bridle. "I'll show you some practical knowledge of the Code. I challenge you to stand and defend yourself."

In an instant the thick barrel of an antique Imperial Guards power gun was in the grey-haired man's hand. He leaned negligently on the high pommel of his saddle with his left elbow, the pistol laid across his forearm pointing unwaveringly at the man before him.

The hard old face smiled grimly. "I don't soil my hands in street brawling with new-hatched nobodies," he said. He nodded toward the arch spanning the street ahead. "Follow me through the arch, if you call yourself a man and a Cavalier." He moved on then; no one hindered him. He rode in silence through the crowd, pulled up at the gate barring the street. This would be the first real test of his cover identity. The papers which had gotten him through Customs and Immigration at Fragonard Spaceport the day before had been burned along with



Retief knew that he had to stay mounted in order to win the deadly encounter.

the civilian clothes. From here on he'd be getting by on the uniform and a cast-iron nerve.

A purse-mouthed fellow wearing the uniform of a Lieutenant-Ensign in the Household Escort Regiment looked him over, squinted his eyes, smiled sourly.

"What can I do for you, Uncle?" He spoke carelessly, leaning against the engraved buttress mounting the wrought-iron gate. Yellow and green sunlight filtered down through the leaves of the giant linden trees bordering the cobbled street.

The grey-haired man stared down at him. "The first thing you can do, Lieutenant-Ensign," he said in a voice of cold steel, "is come to a position of attention."

The thin man straightened, frowning. "What's that?" His expression hardened. "Get down off that beast and let's have a look at your papers—if you've got any."

The mounted man didn't move. "I'm making allowances for the fact that your regiment is made up of idlers who've never learned to soldier," he said quietly. "But having had your attention called to it, even you should recognize the insignia of a Battle Commander."

The officer stared, glancing over the drab figure of the old man. Then he saw the tarnished gold thread worked into the design of a dragon rampant, almost invisible against the faded color of the heavy velvet cape.

He licked his lips, cleared his throat, hesitated. What in name of the Tormented One would a top-ranking battle officer be doing on this thin old horse, dressed in plain worn clothing? "Let me see your papers—Commander," he said.

The Commander flipped back the cape to expose the ornate butt of the power pistol.

"Here are my credentials," he said. "Open the gate."

"Here," the Ensign spluttered, "What's this . . ."

"For a man who's taken the Emperor's commission," the old man said, "you're criminally ignorant of the courtesies due a general officer. Open the gate or I'll blow it open. You'll not deny the way to an Imperial Battle officer." He drew the pistol.

The Ensign gulped, thought fleetingly of sounding the alarm signal, of insisting on seeing papers . . . Then as the pistol came up, he closed the switch, and the gate swung

open. The heavy hooves of the gaunt horse clattered past him; he caught a glimpse of a small brand on the lean flank. Then he was staring after the retreating back of the terrible old man. Battle Commander indeed! The old fool was wearing a fortune in valuable antiques, and the animal bore the brand of a thoroughbred battle-horse. He'd better report this . . . He picked up the communicator, as a tall young man with an angry face came up to the gate.

Retief rode slowly down the narrow street lined with the stalls of suttlers, metalsmiths, weapons technicians, freelance squires. The first obstacle was behind him. He hadn't played it very suavely, but he had been in no mood for bandying words. He had been angry ever since he had started this job; and that, he told himself, wouldn't do. He was beginning to regret his high-handedness with the crowd outside the gate. He should save the temper for those responsible, not the bystanders; and in any event, an agent of the Corps should stay cool at all times. That was essentially the same criticism that Magnan had handed him along with the assignment, three months ago.

"The trouble with you, Retief," Magnan had said, "is that you are unwilling to accept the traditional restraints of the Service; you conduct yourself too haughtily, too much in the manner of a free agent . . ."

His reaction, he knew, had only proved the accuracy of his superior's complaint. He should have nodded penitent agreement, indicated that improvement would be striven for earnestly; instead, he had sat expressionless, in a silence which inevitably appeared antagonistic.

He remembered how Magnan had moved uncomfortably, cleared his throat, and frowned at the papers before him. "Now, in the matter of your next assignment," he said, "we have a serious situation to deal with in an area that could be critical."

Retief almost smiled at the recollection. The man had placed himself in an amusing dilemma. It was necessary to emphasize the great importance of the job at hand, and simultaneously to avoid letting Retief have the satisfaction of feeling that he was to be intrusted with anything vital; to express the lack of confidence the Corps felt in him while at the same time invoking his awareness of the great

trust he was receiving. It was strange how Magnan could rationalize his personal dislike into a righteous concern for the best interests of the Corps.

Magnan had broached the nature of the assignment obliquely, mentioning his visit as a tourist to Northroyal, a charming, backward little planet settled by Cavaliers, refugees from the breakup of the Empire of the Lily.

Retief knew the history behind Northroyal's tidy, proud, tradition-bound society. When the Old Confederation broke up, dozens of smaller governments had grown up among the civilized worlds. For a time, the Lily Empire had been among the most vigorous of them, comprising Twenty-one worlds, and supporting an excellent military force under the protection of which the Lilyan merchant fleet had carried trade to a thousand far-flung worlds.

When the Concordiat had come along, organizing the previously sovereign states into a new Galactic jurisdiction, the Empire of the Lily had resisted, and had for a time held the massive Concordiat fleets at bay. In the end, of course, the gallant but outnumbered Lilyan forces had been driven back to the gates of the home world. The planet of Lily had been saved catastrophic bombardment only by a belated truce which guaranteed self-determination to Lily on the cessation of hostilities, disbandment of the Lilyan fleet, and the exile of the entire membership of the Imperial Suite, which, under the Lilyan clan tradition, had numbered over ten thousand individuals. Every man, woman, and child who could claim even the most distant blood relationship to the Emperor, together with their servants, dependents, retainers, and proteges, were included. The move took weeks to complete, but at the end of it the Cavaliers, as they were known, had been transported to an uninhabited, cold, sea-world, which they named Northroyal. A popular bit of lore in connection with the exodus had it that the ship bearing the Emperor himself had slipped away en route to exile, and that the ruler had sworn that he would not return until the day he could come with an army of liberation. He had never been heard from again.

The land area of the new world, made up of innumerable islands, totalled half a million square miles. Well stocked with basic supplies

and equipment, the cavaliers had set to work and turned their rocky fief into a snug, well integrated—if tradition ridden—society, and today exported seafoods, fine machinery, and tourist literature.

It was in the latter department that Northroyal was best known. Tales of the pomp and color, the quaint inns and good food, the beautiful girls, the brave display of royal cavalry, and the fabulous annual Tournament of the Lily attracted a goodly number of sightseers, and the Cavalier Line was now one of the planet's biggest foreign-exchange earners.

Magnan had spoken of Northroyal's high industrial potential, and her well-trained civilian corps of space navigators.

"The job of the Corps," Retief interrupted, "is to seek out and eliminate threats to the peace of the Galaxy. How does a little story-book world like Northroyal get into the act?"

"More easily than you might imagine," Magnan said. "Here you have a close-knit society, proud, conscious of a tradition of military power, empire. A clever rabble-rouser using the right appeal would step into a ready-made situation there. It would take only an order on the part of the planetary government to turn the factories to war production, and convert the merchant fleet into a war fleet—and we'd be faced with a serious power imbalance—a storm center."

"I think you're talking nonsense, Mr. Minister," Retief said bluntly. "They've got more sense than that. They're not so far gone on tradition as to destroy themselves. They're a practical people."

Magnan drummed his fingers on the desk top. "There's one factor I haven't covered yet," he said. "There has been what amounts to a news blackout from Northroyal during the last six months . . ."

Retief snorted. "What news?"

Magnan had been enjoying the suspense. "Tourists have been having great difficulty getting to Northroyal," he said. "Fragonard, the capital, is completely closed to outsiders. We managed, however, to get an agent in." He paused, gazing at Retief. "It seems," he went on, "that the rightful Emperor has turned up."

Retief narrowed his eyes. "What's that?" he said sharply.

Magnan drew back, intimidated by the power of Retief's

tone, annoyed by his own reaction. In his own mind, Magnan was candid enough to know that this was the real basis for his intense dislike for his senior agent. It was an instinctive primitive fear of physical violence. Not that Retief had ever assaulted anyone; but he had an air of mastery that made Magnan feel trivial.

"The Emperor;" Magnan repeated. "The traditional story is that he was lost on the voyage to Northroyal. There was a legend that he had slipped out of the hands of the Concordiat in order to gather new support for a counter-offensive, hurl back the invader, all that sort of thing."

"The Concordiat collapsed of its own weight within a century," Retief said. "There's no invader to hurl back. Northroyal is free and independent like every other world."

"Of course, of course," Magnan said. "But you're missing the emotional angle, Retief. It's all very well to be independent; but what about the dreams of Empire, the vanished glory, Destiny, et cetera?"

"What about them?"

"That's all our agent heard; it's everywhere. The news strips are full of it. Video is playing it up; everybody's talking it. The returned Emperor seems to be a clever propagandist; the next step will be a full scale mobilization. And we're not equipped to handle that."

"What am I supposed to do about all this?"

"Your orders are, and I quote, to proceed to Fragonard and there employ such measures as shall be appropriate to negate the present trend toward an expansionist sentiment among the populace." Magnan passed a document across the desk to Retief for his inspection.

The orders were brief, and wasted no wordage on details. As an officer of the Corps with the rank of Counsellor, Retief enjoyed wide latitude, and broad powers—and corresponding responsibility in the event of failure. Retief wondered how this assignment had devolved on him, among the thousands of Corps agents scattered through the Galaxy. Why was one man being handed a case which on the face of it should call for a full mission?

"This looks like quite an undertaking for a single agent, Mr. Minister," Retief said.

"Well, of course, if you

don't feel you can handle it . . ." Magnan looked solemn.

Retief looked at him, smiling faintly. Magnan's tactics had been rather obvious. Here was one of those nasty jobs which could easily pass in reports as routine if all went well; but even a slight mistake could mean complete failure, and failure meant war; and the agent who had let it happen would be finished in the Corps.

There was danger in the scheme for Magnan, too. The blame might reflect back on him. Probably he had plans for averting disaster after Retief had given up. He was too shrewd to leave himself out in the open. And for that matter, Retief reflected, too good an agent to let the situation get out of hand.

No, it was merely an excellent opportunity to let Retief discredit himself, with little risk of any great credit accruing to him in the remote event of success.

Retief could, of course, refuse the assignment, but that would be the end of his career. He would never be advanced to the rank of Minister, and age limitations would force his retirement in a year or two. That would be an easy victory for Magnan.

Retief liked his work as an officer-agent of the Diplomatic Corps, that ancient supranational organization dedicated to the controvention of war. He had made his decision long ago, and he had learned to accept his life as it was, with all its imperfections. It was easy enough to complain about the petty intrigues, the tyranies of rank, the small inequities. But these were merely a part of the game, another challenge to be met and dealt with. The overcoming of obstacles was Jame Retief's specialty. Some of the obstacles were out in the open, the recognized difficulties inherent in any tough assignment. Others were concealed behind a smoke-screen of personalities and efficiency reports; and both were equally important. You did your job in the field, and then you threaded your way through the maze of Corps politics. And if you couldn't handle the job—any part of it—you'd better find something else to do.

He had accepted the assignment of course, after letting Magnan wonder for a few minutes; and then for two months he had buried himself in research, gathering every scrap of information, direct and indirect, that the massive files of the Corps would yield. He had soon found himself

immersed in the task, warming to its challenge, fired with emotions ranging from grief to rage as he ferreted out the hidden pages in the history of the exiled Cavaliers.

He had made his plan, gathered a potent selection of ancient documents and curious objects; a broken chain of gold, a tiny key, a small silver box. And now he was here, inside the compound of the Grand Corrida.

Everything here in these ways surrounding and radiating from the Field of the Emerald Crown—the arena itself—was devoted to the servicing and supplying of the thousands of First Day contenders in the Tournament of the Lily, and the housing and tending of the dwindling number of winners who stayed on for the following days. There were tiny eating places, taverns, inns; all consciously antique in style, built in imitation of their counterparts left behind long ago on far off Lily.

"Here you are, pop, first-class squire," called a thin red-haired fellow.

"Double up and save credits," called a short dark man. "First-day contract . . ."

Shouts rang back and forth across the alley-like street as the stall keepers scented a customer. Retief ignored them, moved on toward the looming wall of the arena. Ahead, a slender youth stood with folded arms before his stall, looking toward the approaching figure on the black horse. He leaned forward, watching Retief intently, then straightened, turned and grabbed up a tall narrow body shield from behind him. He raised the shield over his head, and as Retief came abreast, called "Battle officer!"

Retief reined in the horse, looked down at the youth.

"At your service, sir," the young man said. He stood straight and looked Retief in the eye. Retief looked back. The horse minced, tossed his head.

"What is your name, boy?" Retief asked.

"Fitzraven, sir."

"Do you know the Code?"

"I know the Code, sir."

Retief stared at him, studying his face, his neatly cut uniform of traditional Imperial green, the old but well oiled leather of his belt and boots.

"Lower your shield, Fitzraven," he said. "You're engaged." He swung down from his horse. "The first thing I want is care for my mount. His name is Danger-by-Night. And then I want an inn for myself."

"I'll care for the horse myself, Commander," Fitzraven said. "And the Commander will find good lodging at the sign of the Phoenix-in-Dexter-Chief; quarters are held ready for my client." The squire took the bridle, pointing toward the inn a few doors away.

Two hours later, Retief came back to the stall, a thirty-two ounce steak and a bottle of Neauveau Beaujolais having satisfied a monumental appetite induced by the long ride down from the spaceport north of Fragonard. The plain banner he had carried in his saddlebag fluttered now from the staff above the stall. He moved through the narrow room to a courtyard behind, and stood in the doorway watching as Fitzraven curried the dusty hide of the lean black horse. The saddle and fittings were laid out on a heavy table, ready for cleaning. There was clean straw in the stall where the horse stood, and an empty grain bin and water bucket indicated the animal had been well fed and watered.

Retief nodded to the squire, and strolled around the courtyard staring up at the deep blue sky of early evening above the irregular line of roofs and chimneys, noting the other squires, the variegated mounts stabled here, listening to the hubbub of talk, the clatter of crockery from the kitchen of the inn. Fitzraven finished his work and came over to his new employer.

"Would the Commander like to sample the night life in the Grand Corrida?"

"Not tonight," Retief said. "Let's go up to my quarters; I want to learn a little more about what to expect."

Retief's room, close under the rafters on the fourth floor of the inn, was small but adequate, with a roomy wardrobe and a wide bed. The contents of his saddlebags were already in place in the room.

Retief looked around. "Who gave you permission to open my saddlebags?"

Fitzraven flushed slightly. "I thought the Commander would wish to have them unpacked," he said stiffly.

"I looked at the job the other squires were doing on their horses," Retief said. "You were the only one who was doing a proper job of tending the animal. Why the special service?"

"I was trained by my father," Fitzraven said. "I serve only true knights, and I perform my duties honorably. If

the Commander is dissatisfied . . ."

"How do you know I'm a true knight?"

"The Commander wears the uniform and weapons of one of the oldest Imperial Guards Battle Units, the Iron Dragon," Fitzraven said. "And the Commander rides a battle horse, true bred."

"How do you know I didn't steal them?"

Fitzraven grinned suddenly. "They fit the Commander too well."

Retief smiled. "All right, son, you'll do," he said. "Now brief me on the First Day. I don't want to miss anything. And you may employ the personal pronoun."

For an hour Fitzraven discussed the order of events for the elimination contests of the First Day of the Tournament of the Lily, the strategies that a clever contender could employ to husband his strength, the pitfalls into which the unwary might fall.

The tournament was the culmination of a year of smaller contests held throughout the equatorial chain of populated islands. The Northroyalans had substituted various forms of armed combat for the sports practiced on most worlds; a compensation for the lost empire, doubtless, a primitive harking-back to an earlier, more glorious day.

Out of a thousand First Day entrants, less than one in ten would come through to face the Second Day. Of course, the First Day events were less lethal than those to be encountered farther along in the three day tourney, Retief learned; there would be a few serious injuries in the course of the opening day, and those would be largely due to the clumsiness or ineptitude on the part of the entrants.

There were no formal entrance requirements, Fitzraven said, other than proof of minimum age and status in the Empire. Not all the entrants were natives of Northroyal; many came from distant worlds, long scattered descendants of the citizens of the shattered Lily Empire. But all competed for the same prizes; status in the Imperial peerage, the honors of the Field of the Emerald crown, and Imperial grants of land, wealth to the successful.

"Will you enter the First Day events, sir," Fitzraven asked, "or do you have a second or third day certification?"

"Neither," Retief said. "We'll sit on the sidelines and watch."

Fitzraven looked surprised. It had somehow not occurred to him that the old man was not to be a combatant. And it was too late to get seats . . .

"How . . ." Fitzraven began, after a pause.

"Don't worry," Retief said. "We'll have a place to sit."

Fitzraven fell silent, tilted his head to one side, listening. Loud voices, muffled by walls, the thump of heavy feet.

"Something is up," Fitzraven said. "Police." He looked at Retief.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Retief said, "if they were looking for me. Let's go find out."

"We need not meet them," the squire said. "There is another way . . ."

"Never mind," Retief said, "as well now as later." He winked at Fitzraven and turned to the door.

Retief stepped off the lift into the crowded common room, Fitzraven at his heels. Half a dozen men in dark blue tunics and tall shakos moved among the patrons, staring at faces. By the door Retief saw the thin-mouthed Ensign he had overawed at the gate. The fellow saw him at the same moment and plucked at the sleeve of the nearest policeman, pointing.

The man dropped a hand to his belt, and at once the other policeman turned, followed his glance to Retief. They moved toward him with one accord. Retief stood waiting.

The first cop planted himself before Retief, looking him up and down. "Your papers!" he snapped.

Retief smiled easily. "I am a peer of the Lily and a Battle officer of the Imperial forces," he said. "On what pretext are you demanding papers of me, Captain?"

The cop raised his eyebrows.

"Let's say you are charged with unauthorized entry into the controlled area of the Grand Corrida, and with impersonating an Imperial officer," he said. "You didn't expect to get away with it, did you grandpa?" The fellow smiled sardonically.

"Under the provisions of the Code," Retief said, "the status of a peer may not be questioned, nor his actions interfered with except by Imperial Warrant. Let me see yours, Captain. And I suggest you assume a more courteous tone when addressing your superior officer." Retief's voice hardened to a whip crack with the last words.

The policeman stiffened, scowled. His hand dropped to the nightstick at his belt.

"None of your insolence, old man," he snarled. "Papers! Now!"

Retief's hand shot out, gripped the officer's hand over the stick. "Raise that stick," he said quietly," and I'll assuredly beat out your brains with it." He smiled calmly into the captain's bulging eyes. The captain was a strong man. He threw every ounce of his strength into the effort to bring up his arm, to pull free of the old man's grasp. The crowd of customers, the squad of police, stood silently, staring, uncertain of what was going on. Retief stood steady; the officer strained, reddened. The old man's arm was like cast steel.

"I see you are using your head, Captain," Retief said. "Your decision not to attempt to employ force against a peer was an intelligent one."

The cop understood. He was was being offered an opportunity to save a little face. He relaxed slowly.

"Very well, uh, sir," he said stiffly. "I will assume you can establish your identity properly; kindly call at the commandant's office in the morning."

Retief released his hold and the officer hustled his men out, shoving the complaining Ensign ahead. Fitzraven caught Retief's eye and grinned.

"Empty pride is a blade with no hilt," he said. "A humble man would have yelled for help."

Retief turned to the barman. "Drinks for all," he called. A happy shout greeted this announcement. They had all enjoyed seeing the police outfaced.

"The cops don't seem to be popular here," the old man said.

Fitzraven sniffed. "A law-abiding subjct parks illegally for five minutes, and they are on him like flies after dead meat; but let his car be stolen by lawless hoodlums—they are nowhere to be seen."

"That has a familiar sound," Retief said. He poured out a tumbler of vodka, looked at Fitzraven.

"Tomorrow," he said. "A big day."

A tall blonde young man near the door looked after him with bitter eyes.

"All right, old man," he muttered. "We'll see then."

The noise of the crowd came to Retief's ears as a muted rumble through the massive pile of the amphitheatre above. A dim light filtered from the low-ceilinged corridor into the cramped office of the assistant Master of the Games.

"If you know your charter,"

Retief said, "you will recall that a Battle Commander enjoys the right to observe the progress of the games from the official box. I claim that privilege."

"I know nothing of this," the cadaverous official replied impatiently. "You must obtain an order from the Master of the Games before I can listen to you." He turned to another flunkey, opened his mouth to speak. A hand seized him by the shoulder, lifted him bodily from his seat. The man's mouth remained open in shock.

Retief held the stricken man at arms length, then drew him closer. His eyes blazed into the gaping eyes of the other. His face was white with fury.

"Little man," he said in a strange, harsh voice, "I go now with my groom to take my place in the official box. Read your Charter well before you interfere with me—and your Holy Book as well." He dropped the fellow with a crash, saw him slide under the desk. No one made a sound. Even Fitzraven looked pale. The force of the old man's rage had been like a lethal radiation crackling in the room.

The squire followed as Retief strode off down the corridor. He breathed deeply, wiping his forehead. This was some old man he had met this year, for sure!

Retief slowed, turning to wait for Fitzraven. He smiled ruefully. "I was rough on the old goat," he said. "But officious pipsqueaks sting me like deerflies."

They emerged from the gloom of the passage into a well-situated box, too the best seats in the first row. Retief stared at the white glare and roiled dust of the arena, the banked thousands of faces looming above, and a sky of palest blue with one tiny white cloud. The gladiators stood in little groups, waiting. A strange scene, Retief thought. A scene from dim antiquity, but real, complete with the odors of fear and excitement, the hot wind that ruffled his hair, the rumbling animal sound from the thousand throats of the many-headed monster. He wondered what it was they really wanted to see here today. A triumph of skill and courage, a reaffirmation of ancient virtues, the spectacle of men who laid life on the gaming table and played for a prize called glory—or was it merely blood and death they wanted?

It was strange that this archaic ritual of the blood tournament, combining the

features of the Circus of Caesar, the joust of Medieval Terran Europe, the Olympic Games, a rodeo, and a six-day bicycle race should have come to hold such an important place in a modern culture, Retief thought. In its present form it was a much distorted version of the traditional Tournament of the Lily, through whose gauntlet the nobility of the old Empire had come. It had been a device of harsh enlightenment to insure and guarantee to every man, once each year, the opportunity to prove himself against others whom society called his betters. Through its discipline, the humblest farm lad could rise by degrees to the highest levels in the Empire. For the original Games had tested every facet of a man, from his raw courage to his finesse in strategy, from his depths of endurance under mortal stress to the quickness of his intellect, from his instinct for truth to his wilyness in eluding a complex trap of violence.

In the two centuries since the fall of the Empire, the Games had gradually become a tourist spectacle, a free-for-all, a celebration—with the added spice of danger for those who did not shrink back, and fat prizes to a few determined finalists. The Imperial Charter was still invoked at the opening of the Games, the old Code reaffirmed; but there were few who knew or cared what the Charter and Code actually said, what terms existed there. The popular mind left such details to the regents of the tourney. And in recent months, with the once sought-after tourists suddenly and inexplicably turned away, it seemed the Games were being perverted to a purpose even less admirable . . .

Well, thought Retief, perhaps I'll bring some of the fine print into play, before I'm done.

Bugle blasts sounded beyond the high bronze gate. Then with a heavy clang it swung wide and a nervous official stepped out nodding jerkily to the front rank of today's contenders.

The column moved straight out across the field, came together with other columns to form a square before the Imperial box. High above, Retief saw banners fluttering, a splash of color from the uniforms of ranked honor guards. The Emperor himself was here briefly to open the Tournament.

Across the field the bugles rang out again; Retief recognized the *Call to Arms* and the

Imperial Salute. Then an amplified voice began the ritual reading of the Terms of the Day.

". . . by the clement dispensation of his Imperial Majesty, to be conducted under the convention of Fragonard, and there be none dissenting . . ." The voice droned on.

It finished at last, and referees moved to their positions. Retief looked at Fitzraven. "The excitement's about to begin."

Referees handed out heavy whips, gauntlets and face shields. The first event would be an unusual one.

Retief watched as the yellow-haired combatant just below the box drew on the heavy leather glove which covered and protected the left hand and forearm, accepted the fifteen-foot lash of braided oxhide. He flipped it tentatively, laying the length out along the ground and recalling it with an effortless turn of the wrist, the frayed tip snapping like a pistol shot. The thing was heavy, Retief noted, and clumsy; the leather had no life to it.

The box had filled now; no one bothered Retief and the squire. The noisy crowd laughed and chattered, called to acquaintances in the stands and on the field below.

A bugle blasted peremptorily nearby, and white-suited referees darted among the milling entrants, shaping them into groups of five. Retief watched the blonde youth, a tall frowning man, and three others of undistinguished appearance.

Fitzraven leaned toward him. "The cleverest will hang back and let the others eliminate each other," he said in a low voice, "so that his first encounter will be for the set."

Retief nodded. A man's task here was to win his way as high as possible; every strategem was important. He saw the blonde fellow inconspicuously edge back as a hurrying referee paired off the other four, called to him to stand by, and led the others to rings marked off on the dusty turf. A whistle blew suddenly, and over the arena the roar of sound changed tone. The watching crowd leaned forward as the hundreds of keyed up gladiators laid on their lashes in frenzied effort. Whips cracked, men howled, feet shuffled; here the crowd laughed as some clumsy fellow sprawled, yelping; there they gasped in excitement as two surly brutes flogged each other in all-out offense.

Retief saw the tip of one man's whip curl around his

opponent's ankle, snatch him abruptly off his feet. The other pair circled warily, rippling their lashes uncertainly. One backed over the line unnoticing and was led away expostulating, no blow having been struck.

The number on the field dwindled away to half within moments. Only a few dogged pairs, now bleeding from cuts, still contested the issue. A minute longer and the whistle blew as the last was settled.

The two survivors of the group below paired off now, and as the whistle blasted again, the tall fellow, still frowning, brought the other to the ground with a single sharp flick of the lash. Retief looked him over. This was a man to watch.

More whistles, and a field now almost cleared; only two men left out of each original five; the blond moved out into the circle, stared across at the other. Retief recognized him suddenly as the fellow who had challenged him outside the gate, over the spilled fruit. So he had followed through the arch.

The final whistle sounded and a hush fell over the watchers. Now the shuffle of feet could be heard clearly, the hissing breath of the weary fighters, the creak and slap of leather.

The blonde youth flipped his lash out lightly, saw it easily evaded, stepped aside from a sharp counter-blow. He feinted, reversed the direction of his cast, and caught the other high on the chest as he dodged aside. A welt showed instantly. He saw a lightning-fast riposte on the way, sprang back. The gauntlet came up barely in time. The lash wrapped around the gauntlet, and the young fellow seized the leather, hauled sharply. The other stumbled forward. The blond brought his whip across the fellow's back in a tremendous slamming blow that sent a great fragment of torn shirt flying. Somehow the man stayed on his feet, backed off, circled. His opponent followed up, laying down one whistling whipcrack after another, trying to drive the other over the line. He had hurt the man with the cut across the back, and now was attempting to finish him easily.

He leaned away from a sluggish pass, and then Retief saw agony explode in his face as a vicious cut struck home. The blonde youth reeled in a drunken circle, out on his feet.

Slow to follow up, the enemy's lash crashed across the circle; the youth, steadying

quickly, slipped under it, struck at the other's stomach. The leather cannoned against the man, sent the remainder of his shirt fluttering in a spatter of blood. With a surge of shoulder and wrist that made the muscles creak, the blonde reversed the stroke, brought the lash back in a vicious cut aimed at the same spot. It struck, smacking with a wet explosive crack. And he struck again, again, as the fellow tottered back, fell over the line.

The winner went limp suddenly, staring across at the man who lay in the dust, pale now, moving feebly for a moment, then slackly still. There was a great deal of blood, and more blood. Retief saw with sudden shock that the man was disembowelled. That boy, thought Retief, plays for keeps.

The next two events constituting the First Day trials were undistinguished exhibitions of a two-handed version of old American Indian wrestling and a brief bout of fencing with blunt-tipped weapons. Eighty men were certified for the Second Day before noon, and Retief and Fitzraven were back in the inn room a few minutes later. "Take some time off now while I catch up on my rest," Retief said. "Have some solid food ready when I wake." Then he retired for the night.

With his master breathing heavily in a profound sleep, the squire went down to the common room and found a table at the back, ordered a mug of strong ale, and sat alone, thinking.

This was a strange one he had met this year. He had seen at once that he was no idler from some high-pressure world, trying to lose himself in a fantasy of the old days. And no more was he a North-royalan; there was a grim force in him, a time-engraved stamp of power that was alien to the neat well-ordered little world. And yet there was no doubt that there was more in him of the true Cavalier than in a Fragonard-born courtier. He was like some ancient warrior noble from the days of the greatness of the Empire. By the two heads, the old man was strange, and terrible in anger!

Fitzraven listened to the talk around him.

"I was just above," a blacksmith at the next table was saying. "He gutted the fellow with the lash! It was monstrous! I'm glad I'm not one of the fools who want to play at warrior. Imagine having

your insides drawn out by a rope of dirty leather!"

"The games have to be tougher now," said another. "We've lain dormant here for two centuries, waiting for something to come — some thing to set us on our way again to power and wealth..."

"Thanks, I'd rather go on living quietly as a smith and enjoying a few of the simple pleasures—there was no glory in that fellow lying in the dirt with his belly torn open you can be sure of that."

"There'll be more than torn bellies to think about, when we mount a battle fleet for Grimwold and Tania," said another.

"The Emperor has returned," snapped the war-like one. "Shall we hang back where he leads?"

The smith muttered. "His is a tortured geneology, by my judgment. I myself trace my ancestry by three lines into the old Place at Lily."

"So do we all. All the more reason we should support our Emperor."

"We live well here; we have no quarrel with other worlds. Why not leave the past to itself?"

"Our Emperor leads; we will follow. If you disapprove, enter the Lily Tournament next year and win a high place; then your advice will be respected."

"No thanks. I like my insides to stay on the inside."

Fitzraven thought of Retief. The old man had said that he held his rank in his own right, citing no geneology. That was strange indeed. The Emperor had turned up only a year ago, presenting the Robe, the Ring, the Seal, the crown jewels, and the Imperial Book which traced his descent through five generations from the last reigning Emperor of the Old Empire.

How could it be that Retief held a commission in his own right, dated no more than thirty years ago? And the rank of Battle Commander. That was a special rank, Fitzraven remembered, a detached rank for a distinguished noble and officer of proven greatness, assigned to no one unit, but dictating his own activities.

Either Retief was a fraud . . . but Fitzraven pictured the old man, his chiseled features that time had not disguised, his soldier's bearing, his fantastic strength, his undoubtedly authentic equipage. Whatever the explanation, he was a true knight. That was enough.

Retief awoke refreshed, and

ravenous. A great rare steak and a giant tankard of autumn ale were ready on the table. He ate, ordered more and ate again. Then he stretched, shook himself, no trace of yesterday's fatigue remaining. His temper was better, too, he realized. He was getting too old to exhaust himself.

"It's getting late, Fitzraven," he said. "Let's be going."

They arrived at the arena and took their places in the official box in time to watch the first event, a cautious engagement with swords.

After four more events and three teams of determined but colorless competition, only a dozen men were left on the field awaiting the next event, including the tall blonde youth who Retief had been watching since he had recognized him. He himself, he reflected, was the reason for the man's presence here; and he had acquitted himself well.

Retief saw a burly warrior carrying a two-handed sword paired off now against the blonde youth. The fellow grinned as he moved up to face the other.

This would be a little different, the agent thought watching; this fellow was dangerous. Yellow-hair moved in, his weapon held level across his chest. The big man lashed out suddenly with the great sword, and the other jumped back, then struck backhanded at his opponent's shoulder, nicked him lightly, sliding back barely in time to avoid a return swing. The still grinning man moved in, the blade chopping the air before him in a whistling figure eight. He pressed his man back, the blade never pausing.

There was no more room; the blonde fellow jumped sideways, dropping the point of his sword in time to intercept a vicious cut. He backstepped; he couldn't let that happen again. The big man was very strong.

The blade was moving again now, the grin having faded a little. He'll have to keep away from him, keep circling, Retief thought. The big fellow's pattern is to push his man back to the edge, then pick him off as he tries to sidestep. He'll have to keep space between them.

The fair-haired man backed, watching for an opening. He jumped to the right, and as the other shifted to face him, leaped back to the left and catching the big man at the end of his reach to the other side, slashed him across the ribs and kept moving. The man roared, twisting around

in vicious cuts at the figure that darted sideways, just out of range. Then the blond brought his claymore across in a low swing that struck solidly across the back of the other's legs, with a noise like a butcher separating ribs with a cleaver.

Like a marionette with his strings cut, the man folded to his knees, sprawled. The other man stepped back, as surgeons' men swarmed up to tend the fallen fighter. There were plenty of them available now; so far the casualties had been twice normal. On the other mounds in view, men were falling. The faint-hearted had been eliminated; the men who were still on their feet were determined, or desperate. There would be no more push-overs.

"Only about six left," Fitzraven called.

"This has been a rather unusual tournament so far," Retief said. "That young fellow with the light hair seems to be playing rough, forcing the pace."

"I have never seen such a businss-like affair," Fitzraven said. "The weak-disposed have been frightened out, and the fighters cut down with record speed. At this rate there will be none left for the Third Day."

There was delay on the field, as referees and other officials hurried back and forth; then an announcement boomed out. The Second Day was officially concluded. The six survivors would be awarded Second Day certificates, and would be eligible for the Third and Last Day tomorrow.

Retief and Fitzraven left the box, made their way through the crowd back to the inn.

"See that Danger-by-Night is well fed and exercised," Retief said to the squire. "And check over all of my gear thoroughly. I wish to put on my best appearance tomorrow; it will doubtless be my last outing of the kind for some time."

Fitzraven hurried away to tend his chores, while Retief ascended to his room to pore over the contents of his dispatch case far into the night.

The Third Day had dawned grey and chill, and an icy wind whipped across the arena. The weather had not discouraged the crowd, however. The stands were packed and the overflow of people stood in the aisles, perched high on the back walls, crowding every available space. Banners flying from the im-

perial box indicated the presence of the royal party. This was the climactic day. The field, by contrast, was almost empty; two of the Second Day winners had not re-entered for today's events, having apparently decided that they had had enough honor for one year. They would receive handsome prizes, and respectable titles; that was enough.

The four who had come to the arena today to stake their winning and their lives on their skill at arms would be worth watching Retief thought. There was the blonde young fellow, still unmarked; a great swarthy ruffian; a tall broad man of perhaps thirty; and a squat bowlegged fellow with enormous shoulders and long arms. They were here to win or die.

From the officials' box Retief and Fitzraven had an excellent view of the arena, where a large circle had been marked out. The officials seated nearby had given them cold glances as they entered, but no one had attempted to interfere. Apparently, they had accepted the situation. Possibly, Retief thought, they had actually studied the charter. He hoped they had studied it carefully. It would make things easier.

Announcements boomed, officials moved about, fanfares blasted, while Retief sat absorbed in thought. The scene reminded him of things he had long forgotten, days long gone, of his youth, when he had studied the martial skills, serving a long apprenticeship under his world's greatest masters. It had been his father's conviction that nothing so trained the eye and mind and body as fencing, judo, savete, and the disciplines of the arts of offense, and defense.

He had abandoned a priceless education when he had left his home to seek his fortune in the main stream of galactic culture, but it had stood him in good stead on more than one occasion. An agent of the Corps could not afford to let himself decline into physical helplessness, and Retief had maintained his skills as well as possible. He leaned forward now, adjusting his binoculars as the bugles rang out. Few in the crowd were better qualified than Retief to judge today's performance. It would be interesting to see how the champions handled themselves on the field.

The first event was about to begin, as the blonde warrior was paired off with the bow-

legged man. The two had been issued slender foils, and now faced each other, blades crossed. A final whistle blew, and blade clashed on blade. The squat man was fast on his feet, bouncing around in a semi-circle before his taller antagonist, probing his defense with great energy. The blonde man backed away slowly, fending off the rain of blows with slight motions of his foil. He jumped back suddenly, and Retief saw a red spot grow on his thigh. The ape-like fellow was more dangerous than he had appeared.

Now the blonde man launched his attack, beating aside the weapon of the other and striking in for the throat, only to have his point deflected at the last instant. The short man backed now, giving ground reluctantly. Suddenly he dropped into a grotesque crouch, and lunged under the other's defense in a desperate try for a quick kill. It was a mistake; the taller man whirled aside, and his blade flicked delicately once. The bowlegged man slid out flat on his face.

"What happened?" Fitzraven said, puzzled. "I didn't see the stroke that nailed him."

"It was very pretty," Retief said thoughtfully, lowering the glasses. "Under the fifth rib and into the heart."

Now the big dark man and the tall broad fellow took their places. The bugles and whistles sounded, and the two launched a furious exchange, first one and then the other forcing his enemy back before losing ground in turn. The crowd roared its approval as the two stamped and thrust, parried and lunged.

"They can't keep up this pace forever," Fitzraven said. "They'll have to slow down."

"They're both good," Retief said. "And evenly matched."

Now the swarthy fellow leaped back, switched the foil to his left hand, then moved quickly in to the attack. Thrown off his pace, the other man faltered, let the blade nick him on the chest, again in the arm. Desperate, he back-pedalled, fighting defensively now. The dark man followed up his advantage, pressing savagely, and a moment later Retief saw a foot of bright steel projecting startlingly from the tall man's back. He took two steps, then folded, as the foil was wrenched from the dark man's hand.

Wave upon wave of sound rolled across the packed stands. Never had they seen such an exhibition as this! It was like the legendary battle

of the heroes of the Empire, the fighters who had carried the Lily banner half across the galaxy.

"I'm afraid that's all," Fitzraven said. "These two can elect either to share the victory of the Tourney now, or to contend for sole honors, and in the history of the Tournament on Northroyal, there have never been fewer than three to share the day."

"It looks as though this is going to be the first time, then," Retief said. "They're getting ready to square off."

Below on the field, a mass of officials surrounded the dark man and the fair one, while the crowd outdid itself. Then a bugle sounded in an elaborate salute.

"That's it," Fitzraven said excitedly. "Heroes' Salute. They're going to do it."

"You don't know how glad I am to hear that," Retief said.

"What will the weapon be?" the squire wondered aloud.

"My guess is, something less deadly than the foil," Retief replied.

Moments later the announcement came. The two champions of the day would settle the issue with bare hands. This, thought Retief, would be something to see.

The fanfares and whistles rang out again, and the two men moved cautiously together. The dark man swung an open-handed blow, which smacked harmlessly against the other's shoulder. An instant later the blonde youth feinted a kick, instead drove a hard left to the dark man's chin, staggering him. He followed up, smashing two blows to the stomach, then another to the head. The dark man moved back, suddenly reached for the blonde man's wrist as he missed a jab, whirled, and attempted to throw his opponent. The blonde man slipped aside, and locked his right arm over the dark man's head, seizing his own right wrist with his left hand. The dark man twisted, fell heavily on the other man, reaching for a headlock of his own.

The two rolled in the dust, then broke apart and were on their feet again. The dark man moved in, swung an open-handed slap which popped loudly against the blonde man's face. It was a device, Retief saw, to enrage the man, dull the edge of his skill.

The blonde man refused to be rattled, however; he landed blows against the dark man's head, evaded another attempt to grapple. It was plain that he preferred to avoid the other's bear-like embrace.

He boxed carefully, giving ground, landing a blow as the opportunity offered. The dark man followed doggedly, seemingly unaffected by the pounding. Suddenly he leaped, took two smashing blows full in the face, and crashed against the blonde man, knocking him to the ground. There was a flying blur of flailing arms and legs as the two rolled across the turf, and as they came to rest, Retief saw that the dark man had gotten his break. Kneeling behind the other, he held him in a rigid stranglehold, his back and shoulder muscles bulging with the effort of holding his powerful adversary immoblized.

"It's all over," Fitzraven said tensely.

"Maybe not," Retief replied. "Not if he plays it right, and doesn't panic."

The blonde man strained at the arm locked at his throat, twisting it fruitlessly. Instinct drove him to tear at the throttling grip, throw off the smothering weight. But the dark man's grip was solid, his position unshakable. Then the blond stopped struggling abruptly and the two seemed as still as an image in stone. The crowd fell silent, fascinated.

"He's given up," Fitzraven said.

"No; watch," Retief said. "He's starting to use his head."

The blonde man's arms reached up now, his hands moving over the other's head, seeking a grip. The dark man pulled his head in, pressing against his victim's back, trying to elude his grip. Then the hands found a hold, and the blonde man bent suddenly forward, heaving with a tremendous surge. The dark man came up, flipped high, his grip slipping. The blond rose as the other went over his head, shifted his grip in midair, and as the dark man fell heavily in front of him, the snap of the spine could be heard loud in the stillness. The battle was over, and the blonde victor rose to his feet amid a roar of applause.

Retief turned to Fitzraven. "Time for us to be going, Fitz," he said. The squire jumped up. "As you command, sir; but the ceremony is quite interesting . . ."

"Never mind that; let's go." Retief moved off, Fitzraven following, puzzled.

Retief descended the steps inside the stands, turned and started down the corridor.

"This way, sir," Fitzraven called. "That leads to the arena."

"I know it," Retief said. "That's where I'm headed."

Fitzraven hurried up alongside. What was the old man going to do now? "Sir," he said, "no one may enter the arena until the tourney has been closed, except the gladiators and the officials. I know this to be an unbreakable law."

"That's right, Fitz," Retief said. "You'll have to stop at the grooms' enclosure."

"But you, sir," Fitzraven gasped . . .

"Everything's under control," Retief said. "I'm going to challenge the Champion."

In the Imperial box, the Emperor Rolan leaned forward, fixing his binoculars on a group of figures at the officials' gate. There seemed to be some sort of disturbance there. This was a piece of damned impudence, just as the moment had arrived for the Imperial presentation of the Honors of the Day. The Emperor turned to an aide.

"What the devil's going on down there?" he snapped.

The courtier murmured into a communicator, listened.

"A madman, Imperial Majesty," he said smoothly. "He wished to challenge the champion."

"A drunk, more likely," Rolan said sharply. "Let him be removed at once. And tell the Master of the Games to get on with the ceremony!"

The Emperor turned to the slim dark girl at his side.

"Have you found the Games entertaining, Monica?"

"Yes, sire," she replied unemotionally.

"Don't call me that, Monica," he said testily. "Between us there is no need of formalities."

"Yes, Uncle," the girl said.

"Damn it, that's worse," he said. "To you I am simply Rolan." He placed his hand firmly on her silken knee. "And now if they'll get on with this tedious ceremony, I should like to be on the way. I'm looking forward with great pleasure to showing you my estates at Snowdahl."

The Emperor drummed his fingers, stared down at the field, raised the glasses only to see the commotion again.

"Get that fool off the field," he shouted, dropping the glasses. "Am I to wait while they haggle with this idiot? It's insufferable . . ."

Courtiers scurried, while Rolan glared down from his seat.

Below, Retief faced a cluster of irate referees. One, who had attempted to haul Retief bodily backward, was slumped

on a bench, attended by two surgeons.

"I claim the right to challenge, under the Charter," Retief repeated. "Nobody here will be so foolish, I hope, as to attempt to deprive me of that right, now that I have reminded you of the justice of my demand."

From the control cage directly below the Emperor's high box, a tall seam-faced man in black breeches and jacket emerged, followed by two armed men. The officials darted ahead, stringing out between the two, calling out. Behind Retief, on the other side of the barrier, Fitzraven watched anxiously. The old man was full of surprises, and had a way of getting what he wanted; but even if he had the right to challenge the Champion of the Games, what purpose could he have in doing so? He was as strong as a bull, but no man his age could be a match for the youthful power of the blonde fighter. Fitzraven was worried; he was fond of this old warrior. He would hate to see him locked behind the steel walls of Fragonard Keep for thus disturbing the order of the Lily Tournament. He moved closer to the barrier, watching.

The tall man in black strode through the chattering officials, stopped before Retief, motioned his two guards forward.

He made a dismissing motion toward Retief. "Take him off the field," he said brusquely. The guards stepped up, laid hands on Retief's arms. He let them get a grip, then suddenly stepped back and brought his arms together. The two men cracked heads, stumbled back. Retief looked at the black-clad man.

"If you are the Master of the Games," he said clearly, "you are well aware that a decorated Battle Officer has the right of challenge, under the Imperial Charter. I invoke that prerogative now, to enter the lists against the man who holds the field."

"Get out, you fool," the official hissed, white with fury. "The Emperor himself has commanded . . ."

"Not even the Emperor can override the Charter, which predates his authority by four hundred years," Retief said coldly. "Now do your duty."

"There'll be no more babble of duties and citing of technicalities while the Emperor waits," the official snapped. He turned to one of the two guards who hung back now, eyeing Retief. "You have a pistol; draw it. "If I give the

command, shoot him between the eyes."

Retief reached up and adjusted a tiny stud set in the stiff collar of his tunic. He tapped his finger lightly against the cloth. The sound boomed across the arena. A command microphone of the type authorized a Battle Commander was a very efficient device.

"I have claimed the right to challenge the champion," he said slowly. The words rolled out like thunder. "This right is guaranteed under the Charter to any Imperial Battle officer who wears the Silver Star."

The Master of the Games stared at him aghast. This was getting out of control. Where the devil had the old man gotten a microphone and a P. A. system? The crowd was roaring now like a gigantic surf. This was something new!

Far above in the Imperial box the tall gray-eyed man was rising, turning toward the exit. "The effrontery," he said in a voice choked with rage. "That I should sit awaiting the pleasure . . ."

The girl at his side hesitated, hearing the amplified voice booming across the arena.

"Wait, . . . Rolan," she said. "Something is happening . . ."

The man looked back. "A trifle late," he snapped.

"One of the contestants is disputing something," she said. "There was an announcement—something about an Imperial officer challenging the champion."

The Emperor Rolan turned to an aide hovering nearby.

"What is this nonsense?"

The courtier bowed. "It is merely a technicality, Majesty. A formality lingering on from earlier times."

"Be specific," the Emperor snapped.

The aide lost some of his aplomb. "Why, it means, ah, that an officer of the Imperial forces holding a battle commission and certain high decorations may enter the lists at any point, without other qualifying conditions. A provision never invoked under modern . . ."

The Emperor turned to the girl. "It appears that someone seeks to turn the entire performance into a farcical affair, at my expense," he said bitterly. "We shall see just how far . . ."

"I call on you, Rolan," Retief's voice boomed, "to enforce the Code."

"What impertinence is this?" Rolan growled. "Who is the fool at the microphone?"

The aide spoke into his communicator, listened.

"An old man from the crowd, sire. He wears the insignia of a Battle-Commander, and a number of decorations, including the Silver Star. According to the Archivist, he has the legal right to challenge."

"I won't have it," Rolan snapped. "A fine reflection on me that would be. Have them take the fellow away; he's doubtless crazed." He left the box, followed by his entourage.

"Rolan," the girl said, "wasn't that the way the Tourneys were, back in the days of the Empire?"

"THESE are the days of the Empire, Monica. And I am not interested in what used to be done. This is today. Am I to present the spectacle of a doddering old fool being hacked to bits, in my name? I don't want the timid to be shocked by butchery. It might have unfortunate results for my propaganda program. I'm currently emphasizing the glorious aspects of the coming war, not the sordid ones. There has already been too much bloodshed today; an inauspicious omen for my expansion plan."

On the field below, the Master of the Games stepped closer to Retief. He felt the cold eyes of the Emperor himself boring into his back. This old devil could bring about his ruin . . .

"I know all about you," he snarled. "I've checked on you, since you forced your way into an official area; I interviewed two officers . . . you overawed them with glib talk and this threadbare finery you've decked yourself in. Now you attempt to ride rough-shod over me. Well, I'm not so easily thrust aside. If you resist arrest any further, I'll have you shot where you stand!"

Retief drew his sword.

"In the name of the Code you are sworn to serve," he said, his voice ringing across the arena, "I will defend my position." He reached up and flipped the stud at his throat to full pick-up.

"To the Pit with your infernal Code!" bellowed the Master, and blanched in horror as his words boomed sharp and clear across the field to the ears of a hundred thousand people. He stared around, then whirled back to Retief. "Fire," he screamed.

A pistol cracked, and the guard spun, dropped. Fitzraven held the tiny power gun leveled across the barrier at the other guard. "What next, sir?" he asked brightly.

The sound of the shot, amplified, smashed deafeningly across the arena, followed by a mob roar of excitement, bewilderment, shock. The group around Retief stood frozen, staring at the dead man. The Master of the Games made a croaking sound, eyes bulging. The remaining guard cast a glance at the pistol, then turned and ran.

There were calls from across the field; then a troop of brown-uniformed men emerged from an entry, trotted toward the group. The officer at their head carried a rapid fire shock gun in his hand. He waved his squad to a halt as he reached the fringe of the group. He stared at Retief's drab uniform, glanced at the corpse. Retief saw that the officer was young, determined looking, wearing the simple insignia of a Battle Ensign.

The Master of the Games found his voice. "Arrest this villain!" he screeched, pointing at Retief. Shoot the murderer!"

The ensign drew himself to attention, saluted crisply.

"Your orders, sir," he said.

"I've told you!" the Master howled. "Seize this malefactor!"

The ensign turned to the black-clad official. "Silence, sir, or I shall be forced to remove you," he said sharply. He looked at Retief. "I await the Commander's orders."

Retief smiled, returned the young officer's salute with a wave of his sword, then sheathed it. "I'm glad to see a little sense displayed here, at last, Battle-Ensign," he said. "I was beginning to fear I'd fallen among Concordiatists."

The outraged Master began an harangue which was abruptly silenced by two riot police. He was led away, protesting. The other officials disappeared like a morning mist, carrying the dead guard.

"I've issued my challenge, Ensign," Retief said. "I wish it to be conveyed to the champion-apparent at once." He smiled. "And I'd like you to keep your men around to see that nothing interferes with the orderly progress of the Tourney in accordance with the Charter in its original form."

The ensign's eyes sparkled. Now here was a battle-officer who sounded like a fighting man; not a windbag like the commandant of the Household Regiment from whom the ensign took his orders. He didn't know where the old man came from, but any battle-officer outranked any civilian or

flabby barracks-soldier, and this was a Battle Commander, a general officer, and of the Dragon Corps!

Minutes later, a chastened Master of the Games announced that a challenge had been issued. It was the privilege of the champion to accept, or to refuse the challenge if he wished. In the latter event, the challenge would automatically be met the following year.

"I don't know what your boys said to the man," Retief remarked, as he walked out to the combat circle, the ensign at his left side and slightly to the rear, "but they seem to have him educated quickly."

"They can be very persuasive, sir," the young officer replied.

They reached the circle, stood waiting. Now, thought Retief, I've got myself in the position I've been working toward. The question now is whether I'm still man enough to put it over.

He looked up at the massed stands, listening to the mighty roar of the crowd. There would be no easy out for him now. Of course, the new champion might refuse to fight; he had every right to do so, feeling he had earned his year's rest and enjoyment of his winnings. But that would be a defeat for Retief as final as death on the dusty ground of the arena. He had come this far by bluff, threat, and surprise. He would never come this close again.

It was luck that he had clashed with this young man outside the gate, challenged him to enter the lists. That might give the challenge the personal quality that would elicit an angry acceptance.

The champion was walking toward Retief now, surrounded by referees. He stared at the old man, eyes narrowed. Retief returned the look calmly.

"Is this dodderer the challenger?" the blonde youth asked scathingly. "It seems to me I have met his large mouth before?"

"Never mind my mouth, merchant," Retief said loudly. "It is not talk I offer you, but the bite of steel."

The yellow-haired man reddened, then laughed shortly. "Small glory I'd win out of skewering you, old graybeard."

"You'd get even less out of showing your heels," Retief said.

"You will not provoke me into satisfying your perverted ambition to die here," the other retorted.

"It's interesting to note," Retief said, "how a peasant peddler wags his tongue to avoid a fight. Such rabble should not be permitted on honorable ground." He studied the other's face to judge how this line of taunting was going on. It was distasteful to have to embarrass the young fellow; he seemed a decent sort. But he had to enrage him to the point that he would discard his wisdom and throw his new-won prize on the table for yet another cast of the dice. And his sore point seemed to be mention of commerce.

"Back to your cabbages, then, fellow," Retief said harshly, "before I whip you there with the flat of my sword."

The young fellow looked at him, studying him. His face was grim. "All right," he said quietly. "I'll meet you in the circle."

Another point gained, Retief thought, as he moved to his position at the edge of the circle. Now, if I can get him to agree to fight on horseback . . .

He turned to a referee. "I wish to suggest that this contest be conducted on horseback—if the peddler owns a horse and is not afraid."

The point was discussed between the referee and the champion's attendants, with many glances at Retief, and much waving of arms. The official returned. "The champion agrees to meet you by day or by night, in heat or cold, on foot or on horseback."

"Good," said Retief. "Tell my groom to bring out my mount."

It was no idle impulse which prompted this move. Retief had no illusions as to what it would take to win a victory over the champion. He knew that his legs, while good enough for most of the business of daily life, were his weakest point. They were no longer the nimble tireless limbs that had once carried him up to meet the outlaw Mal de Di alone in Bifrost Pass. Nine hours later he had brought the bandit's two hundred and ten pound body down into the village on his back, his own arm broken. He had been a mere boy then, younger than this man he was now to meet. He had taken up Mal de Di's standing challenge to any unarmed man who would come alone to the high pass, to prove that he was not too young to play a man's part. Perhaps now he was trying to prove he was not too old . . .

An official approached lead-

ing Danger-by-Night. It took an expert to appreciate the true worth of the great gaunt animal, Retief knew. To the uninitiated eye, he presented a sorry appearance, but Retief would rather have had this mount with the imperial brand on his side, than a paddock full of show horses.

A fat white charger was led out to the blonde champion. It looked like a strong animal, Retief thought, but slow. His chances were looking better, things were going well.

A ringing blast of massed trumpets cut through the clamor of the crowd. Retief mounted, watching his opponent. A referee came to his side, handed up a heavy club, studded with long projecting spikes. "Your weapon, sir," he said.

Retief took the thing. It was massive, clumsy; he had never before handled such a weapon. He knew no subtleties of technique with this primitive bludgeon. The blonde youth had surprised him, he admitted to himself, smiling slightly. As the challenged party, he had the choice of weapons, of course. He had picked an unusual one.

Retief glanced across at Fitzraven, standing behind the inner barrier, jaw set, a grim expression on his face. That boy, thought Retief, doesn't have much confidence in my old bones holding out.

The whistle blew. Retief moved toward the other man at a trot, the club level at his side. He had decided to handle it like a shortsword, so long as that seemed practical. He would have to learn by experience.

The white horse cantered past him swerving, and the blond fellow whirled his club at Retief's head. Automatically, Retief raised his club, fended off the blow, cut at the other's back, missed. This thing is too short, Retief thought, whirling his horse. I've got to get in closer. He charged at the champion as the white horse was still in mid-turn, slammed a heavy blow against his upraised club, rocking the boy; then he was past, turning again. He caught the white horse shorter this time, barely into his turn, and aimed a swing at the man who first twisted to face him, then spurred, leaped away. Retief pursued him, yelping loudly. Get him rattled, he thought. Get him good and mad!

The champion veered suddenly, veered again, then reared his horse high, whirling, to

bring both forefeet down in a chopping attack. Retief reined in, and Danger-by-Night sidestepped disdainfully, as the heavy horse crashed down facing him.

That was a pretty maneuver, Retief thought; but slow, too slow.

His club swung in an overhand cut; the white horse tossed his head suddenly, and the club smashed down across the animal's skull. With a shuddering exhalation, the beast collapsed, and the blonde man sprang clear.

Retief reined back, dismayed. He hadn't wanted to kill the animal. He had the right, now, to ride the man down from the safety of the saddle. When gladiators met in mortal combat, there were no rules except those a man made for himself. If he dismounted, met his opponent on equal terms, the advantage his horse had given him would be lost. He looked at the man standing now, facing him, waiting, blood on his face from the fall. He thought of the job he had set himself, the plan that hinged on his victory here. He reminded himself that he was old, too old to meet youth on equal terms; but even as he did so, he was reining the lean battle stallion back, swinging down from the saddle. There were some things a man had to do, whether logic was served or not. He couldn't club the man down like a mad dog from the saddle.

There was a strange expression on the champion's face. He sketched a salute with the club he held. "All honor to you, old man," he said. "Now I will kill you." He moved in confidently.

Retief stood his ground, raising his club to deflect a blow, shifting an instant ahead of the pattern of the blonde man's assault. There was a hot exchange as the younger man pressed him, took a glancing blow on the temple, stepped back breathing heavily. This wasn't going as he had planned. The old man stood like a wall of stone, not giving an inch; and when their weapons met, it was like flailing at a granite boulder. The young fellow's shoulder ached from the shock. He moved sideways, circling cautiously.

Retief moved to face him. It was risky business, standing up to the attack, but his legs were not up to any fancy footwork. He had no desire to show his opponent how stiff his movements were, or to tire himself with skipping about. His arms were still as good as

any man's, or better. They would have to carry the battle.

The blonde jumped in, swung a vicious cut; Retief leaned back, hit out in a one-handed blow, felt the club smack solidly against the other's jaw. He moved now, followed up, landed again on the shoulder. The younger man backed, shaking his head. Retief stopped, waited. It was too bad he couldn't follow up his advantage, but he couldn't chase the fellow all over the arena. He had to save his energy for an emergency. He lowered his club, leaned on it. The crowd noises waxed and waned, unnoticed. The sun beat down in unshielded whiteness, and fitful wind moved dust across the field.

"Come back, peddler," he called. "I want you to sample more of my wares." If he could keep the man angry, he would be careless; and Retief needed the advantage.

The yellow-haired man charged suddenly, whirling the club. Retief raised his, felt the shock of the other's weapon against his. He whirled as the blonde darted around him, shifted the club to his left hand in time to ward off a wild swing. Then the fingers of his left hand exploded in fiery agony, and the club flew from his grasp. His head whirled, vision darkening, at the pain from his smashed fingers. He tottered, kept his feet, managed to blink away the faintness, to stare at this hand. Two fingers were missing, pulped, unrecognizable. He had lost his weapon; he was helpless now before the assault of the other.

His head hummed harshly, and his breath came like hot sand across an open wound. He could feel a tremor start and stop in his leg, and his whole left arm felt as though it had been stripped of flesh in a shredding machine. He had not thought it would be as bad as this. His ego, he realized, hadn't aged gracefully.

Now is the hour, old man, he thought. There's no help for you to call on, no easy way out. You'll have to look within yourself for some hidden reserve of strength and endurance and will; and you must think well now, wisely, with a keen eye and a quick hand, or lose your venture. With a moment stiffened by the racking pain-shock, he drew his ceremonial dagger, a jewel-encrusted blade ten inches long. At the least he would die with a weapon in his hand and his face to the enemy.

The blonde youth moved closer, tossed the club aside.

"Shall a peddler be less capable of the *beau geste* than the arrogant knight?" He laughed, drawing a knife from his belt. "Is your head clear, old man?" he asked. "Are you ready?"

"A gesture . . . you can . . . ill afford," Retief managed. Even breathing hurt. His nerves were shrieking their message of shock at the crushing of living flesh and bone. His forehead was pale, wet with cold sweat.

The young fellow closed, struck out, and Retief evaded the point by an inch, stepped back. His body couldn't stand pain as once it had, he was realizing. He had grown soft, sensitive. For too many years he had been a Diplomat, an operator by manipulation, by subtlety and finesse. Now, when it was man to man, brute strength against brute strength, he was failing.

But he had known when he started that strength was not enough, not without agility; it was subtlety he should be relying on now, his skill at trickery, his devious wit.

Retief caught a glimpse of staring faces at the edge of the field, heard for a moment the mob roar, and then he was again wholly concentrated on the business at hand.

He breathed deeply, struggling for clear-headedness. He had to inveigle the boy into a contest in which he stood a chance. If he could put him on his mettle, make him give up his advantage of tireless energy, quickness . . .

"Are you an honest peddler, or a dancing master," Retief managed to growl. "Stand and meet me face to face."

The blonde man said nothing, feinting rapidly, then striking out. Retief was ready, nicked the other's wrist.

"Gutter fighting is one thing," Retief said. "But you are afraid to face the old man's steel, right arm against right arm." If he went for that, Retief thought, he was even younger than he looked.

"I have heard of the practice," the blonde man said, striking at Retief, moving aside from a return cut. "It was devised for old men who did not wish to be made ridiculous by more agile men. I understand that you think you can hoodwink me, but I can beat you at your own game . . ."

"My point awaits your pleasure," Retief said.

The younger man moved closer, knife held before him. Just a little closer, Retief thought. Just a little closer.

The blonde man's eyes were

on Retief's. Without warning, Retief dropped his knife and in a lightning motion caught the other's wrist.

"Now struggle, little fish," he said. "I have you fast."

The two men stood chest to chest, staring into each other's eyes. Retief's breath came hard, his heart pounded almost painfully. His left arm was a great pulsating weight of pain. Sweat ran down his dusty face into his eyes. But his grip was locked solidly. The blonde youth strained in vain.

With a twist of his wrist Retief turned the blade, then forced the youth's arm up. The fellow struggled to prevent it, throwing all his weight into his effort, fruitlessly. Retief smiled.

"I won't kill you," he said, "but I will have to break your arm. That way you cannot be expected to continue the fight."

"I want no favors from you, old man," the youth panted.

"You won't consider this a favor until the bones knit," Retief said. "Consider this a fair return for my hand."

He pushed the arm up, then suddenly turned it back, levered the upper arm over his forearm, and yanked the tortured member down behind the blonde man' back. The bones snapped audibly, and the white-faced youth gasped, staggered as Retief released him.

There were minutes of confusion as referees rushed in, announcements rang out, medics hovered, and the crowd roared its satisfaction, after the fickle nature of crowds. They were satisfied.

An official pushed through to Retief. He wore the vivid colors of the Review regiment. Retief reached up and set the control on the command mike.

"I have the honor to advise you, sir, that you have won the field, and the honors of the day." He paused, startled at the booming echoes, then went on. The bystanders watched curiously, as Retief tried to hold his concentration on the man, to stand easily, while blackness threatened to move in over him. The pain from the crushed hand swelled and focused, then faded, came again. The great dry lungfulls of air he drew in failed to dispel the sensation of suffocation. He struggled to understand the words that seemed to echo from a great distance.

"And now in the name of the Emperor, for crimes against the peace and order of the Empire, I place you under

arrest for trial before the High Court at Fragonard."

Retief drew a deep breath, gathered his thoughts to speak.

"Nothing," he said, "could possibly please me more."

The room was vast and ornate, and packed with dignitaries, high officials, peers of the Lily. Here in the great chamber known as the Blue Vault, the High Court sat in silent ranks, waiting.

The charges had been read, the evidence presented. The prisoner, impersonating a peer of the Lily and an officer of an ancient and honored Corps, had flaunted the law of Northroyal and the authority of the Emperor, capping his audacity with murder, done by the hand of his servant sworn. Had the prisoner anything to say?

Retief, alone in the prisoner's box in the center of the room, his arm heavily bandaged and deadened with dope, faced the court. This would be the moment when all his preparations would be put to the ultimate test. He had laid long plans toward this hour. The archives of the Corps were beyond comparison in the galaxy, and he had spent weeks there, absorbing every detail of the fact that had been recorded on the world of Northroyal, and on the Old Empire which had preceded it. And to the lore of the archives, he had added facts known to himself, data from his own wide experience. But would those tenuous threads of tradition, hearsay, rumor, and archaic record hold true now? That was the gamble on which his mission was staked. The rabbits had better be in the hat.

He looked at the dignitaries arrayed before him. It had been a devious route, but so far he had succeeded; he had before him the highest officials of the world, the High Justices, the Imperial Archivist, the official keepers of the Charter and the Code, and of the protocols and rituals of the tradition on which this society was based. He had risked everything on his assault on the sacred stasis of the Tournament, but how else could he have gained the ears of this select audience, with all Northroyal tuned in to hear the end of the drama that a hundred thousand had watched build to its shattering climax?

Now it was his turn to speak. It had better be good.

"Peers of the realm," Retief said, speaking clearly and slowly, "the basis of the charges laid against me is the

assumption that I have falsified my identity. Throughout, I have done no more than exercise the traditional rights of a general officer and of a Lilyan peer, and, as befits a Cavalier, I have resisted all attempts to deprive me of those honored prerogatives. While it is regrettable that the low echelon of officials appears to be ignorant of the status of a Lilyan Battle Commander, it is my confident assumption that here, before the ranking nobles of the Northroyalan peerage, the justice of my position will be recognized."

As Retief paused, a dour graybeard spoke up from the Justices' bench.

"Your claims are incoherent to this court. You are known to none of us; and if by chance you claim descent from some renegade who deserted his fellow cavaliers at the time of the Exile, you will find scant honor among honest men here. From this, it is obvious that you delude yourself in imagining that you can foist your masquerade on this court successfully."

"I am not native to Northroyal," Retief said, "nor do I claim to be. Nor am I a descendant of renegades. Are you gentlemen not overlooking the fact that there was one ship which did not accompany the cavaliers into exile, but escaped Concordiat surveillance and retired to rally further opposition to the invasion?"

There was a flurry of muttered comment, putting together of heads, and shuffling of papers. The High Justice spoke.

"This would appear to be a reference to the vessel bearing the person of the Emperor Roquelle and his personal suite . . ."

"That is correct," Retief said.

"You stray farther than ever from the credible," a justice snapped. "The entire royal household accompanied the Emperor Rolan on the happy occasion of his rejoining his subjects here at Northroyal a year ago."

"About that event, I will have more to say later," Retief said coolly. "For the present, suffice it to say that I am a legitimate descendant . . ."

"It does indeed NOT suffice to say!" barked the High Justice. "Do you intend to instruct this court as to what evidence will be acceptable?"

"A figure of speech, Milord," Retief said. "I am quite able to prove my statement."

"Very well," said the High Justice. "Let us see your

proof, though I confess I cannot conceive of a satisfactory one."

Retief reached down, unsnapped the flat despatch case at his belt, drew out a document.

"This is my proof of my bona fides," he said. "I present it in evidence that I have committed no fraud. I am sure that you will recognize an authentic commission-in-patent of the Emperor Roquelle. Please note that the seals are unbroken." He passed the paper over.

A page took the heavy paper, looped with faded red ribbon and plastered with saucer-sized seals, trotted over to the Justices' bench and handed it up to the High Justice. He took it, gazed at it, turning it over, then broke the crumbling seals. The nearby Justices leaned over to see this strange exhibit. It was a heavily embossed document of the Old Empire type, setting forth genealogy and honors, and signed in sprawling letters with the name of an emperor two centuries dead, sealed with his tarnished golden seal. The Justices stared in amazement. The document was worth a fortune.

"I ask that the lowermost paragraph be read aloud," Retief said. "The amendment of thirty years ago."

The High Justice hesitated, then waved a page to him, handed down the document. "Read the lowermost paragraph aloud," he said.

The page read in a clear, well-trained voice.

"KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS THAT WHEREAS: THIS OUR LOYAL SUBJECT AND PEER OF THE IMPERIAL LILY JAME JARL FREELORD OF THE RETIEF; OFFICER IMPERIAL OF THE GUARD; OFFICER OF BATTLE; HEREDITARY LEGIONNAIRE OF HONOR; CAVALIER OF THE LILY; DEFENDER OF SALIENT WEST; BY IMPERIAL GRACE OFFICER OF THE SILVER STAR; HAS BY HIS GALLANTRY FIDELITY AND SKILL BROUGHT HONOR TO THE IMPERIAL LILY: AND WHEREAS WE PLACE SPECIAL CONFIDENCE AND ESTEEM IN THIS SUBJECT AND PEER: WE DO THEREFORE APPOINT AND COMMAND THAT HE SHALL FORTHWITH ASSUME AND HENCEFORTH BEAR THE HONORABLE RANK OF BATTLE COMMANDER: AND THAT HE SHALL BEAR THE OBLIGATIONS AND ENJOY THE PRIVILEGES APPERTAINING THEREUNTO: AS SHALL HIS HEIRS FOREVER."

There was a silence in the chamber as the page finish-

ed reading. All eyes turned to Retief, who stood in the box, strange expression on his face.

The page handed the paper back up to the High Justice, who resumed his perusal.

"I ask that my retinal patterns now be examined, and matched to those coded on the amendment," Retief said. The High Justice beckoned to a Messenger, and the court waited a restless five minutes until the arrival of an expert who quickly made the necessary check. He went to the Justice's bench, handed up a report form, and left the court room. The magistrate glanced at the form, turned again to the document. Below Roquelle's seal were a number of amendments, each in turn signed and sealed. The justices spelled out the unfamiliar names.

"Where did you get this?" the High Justice demanded uncertainly.

"It has been the property of my family for nine generations," Retief replied.

Heads nodded over the document, gray beards wagged.

"How is it," asked a Justice, "that you offer in evidence a document bearing amendments validated by signatures and seals completely unknown to us? In order to impress this court, such a warrant might well bear the names of actual former emperors, rather than of fictitious ones. I note the lowermost amendment, purporting to be a certification of high military rank dated only thirty years ago is signed 'Ronare.' "

"I was at that time attached to the Imperial Suite-in-Exile," Retief said. "I commanded the forces of the Emperor Ronare."

The High Justice and a number of other members of the court snorted openly.

"This impertinence will not further your case," the old magistrate said sharply. "Ronare, indeed. You cite a nonexistent authority. At the alleged time of issue of this warrant, the father of our present monarch held the Imperial fief at Trallend."

"At the time of the issue of this document," Retief said in ringing tones, "the father of your present ruler held the bridle when the Emperor mounted!"

An uproar broke out from all sides. The Master-at-arms pounded in vain for silence. At length a measure of order was restored by a gangly official who rose and shouted for the floor. The roar died down, and the stringy fellow, clad in russet velvet with the gold

chain of the Master of the Seal about his neck, called out, "let the court find the traitor guilty summarily and put an end to this insupportable insolence . . ."

"Northroyal has been the victim of fraud," Retief said loudly in the comparative lull. "But not on my part. The man Rolan is an imposter."

A tremendous pounding of gavels and staffs eventually brought the outraged dignitaries to grim silence. The Presiding Justice peered down at Retief with doom in his lensed eyes. "Your knowledge of the Lilyan tongue and of the forms of court practice as well as the identity of your retinal patterns with those of the warrant tend to substantiate your origin in the Empire. Accordingly, this court is now disposed to recognize in you that basest of offenders, a renegade of the peerage." He raised his voice. "Let it be recorded that one Jame Jarl, a freelord of the Imperial Lily and officer Imperial of the Guard has by his own words disavowed his oath and his lineage." The fiery old man glared around at his fellow jurists. "Now let the dog of a broken officer be sentenced!"

"I have proof of what I say," Retief called out. "Nothing has been proven against me. I have acted by the Code, and by the Code I demand my hearing!"

"You have spurned the Code," said a fat dignitary.

"I have told you that a usurper sits on the Lily throne," Retief said. "If I can't prove it, execute me."

There was an icy silence.

"Very well," said the High Justice. "Present your proof."

"When the man, Rolan, appeared," Retief said, "he presented the Imperial seal and ring, the ceremonial robe, the major portion of the crown jewels, and the Imperial Geneology."

"That is correct."

"Was it noted, by any chance, that the seal was without its chain, that the robe was stained, that the most important of the jewels, the ancient Napoleon Emerald, was missing; that the ring bore deep scratches, and that the lock on the book had been forced?"

A murmur grew along the high benches of the court. Intent eyes glared down at Retief.

"And was it not considered strange that the Imperial signet was not presented by this would-be Emperor, when that signet alone constitutes the true symbol of the Empire?"

Retief's voice had risen to a thunderous loudness.

The High Justice stared now with a different emotion in his eyes.

"What do you know of these matters?" he demanded, but without assurance.

Retief reached into a tiny leather bag at his side, drew out something which he held out for inspection.

"This is a broken chain," he said. "It was cut when the seal was stolen from its place in Suite-in-Exile." He placed the heavy links on the narrow wainscote before him. "This," he said, "is the Napoleon Emerald, once worn by the legendary Bonaparte in a ring. It is unique in the galaxy, and easily proved genuine." There was utter stillness now. Retief placed a small key beside the chain and the gem. "This key will open the forced lock of the Imperial Geneological Record."

Retief brought out an ornately wrought small silver casket and held it in view.

"The stains on the robe are the blood of the Emperor Ronare, shed by the knife of a murderer. The ring is scratched by the same knife, used to sever the finger in order to remove the ring." A murmur of horrified comment ran round the room now. Retief waited, letting all eyes focus on the silver box in his hand. It contained a really superb copy of the Imperial Signet; like the chain, the key and the emerald, the best that the science of the Corps could produce, accurate even in its internal molecular structure. It had to be, if it were to have a chance of acceptance. It would be put to the test without delay, matched to an electronic matrix with which it would, if acceptable, resonate perfectly, The copy had been assembled on the basis of some excellent graphic records; the original signet, as Retief knew, had been lost irretrievably in a catastrophic palace fire, a century and a half ago.

He opened the box, showed the magnificent wine-red crystal set in platinum. Now was the moment. "This is the talisman which alone would prove the falseness of the imposter Rolan," Retief said. "I call upon the honorable High Court to match it to the matrix; and while that is being done, I ask that the honorable Justices study carefully the geneology included in the Imperial patent which I have presented to the court."

A messenger was dispatched to bring in the matrix while the Justices adjusted the focus of their corrective

lenses and clustered over the document. The chamber buzzed with tense excitement. This was a fantastic development indeed!

The High Justice looked up as the massive matrix device was wheeled into the room. He stared at Retief. "This geneology—" he began.

A Justice plucked at his sleeve, indicated the machine, whispering something. The High Justice nodded.

Retief handed the silver box down carefully to a page, watched as the chamber of the machine was opened, the great crystal placed in position. He held his breath as technicians twiddled controls, studied dials, then closed a switch. There was a sonorous musical tone from the machine.

The technician looked up. "The crystal," he said, "does match the matrix."

Amid a burst of exclamations which died as he faced the High Justice, Retief spoke.

"My lords, peers of the Imperial Lily," he said in a ringing voice, "know by this signet that we, Retief, by the grace of God Emperor, do now claim our rightful throne."

And just as quickly as the exclamations had died, they rose once more—a mixture of surprise and awe.



EPILOGUE

"A brilliant piece of work, Mr. Minister, and congratulations on your promotion," the Ambassador-at-large said warmly. "You've shown what individualism and the unorthodox approach can accomplish where the academic viewpoint would consider the situation hopeless."

"Thank you, Mr. Ambassador," Retief replied, smiling. "I was surprised myself when it was all over, that my gamble paid off. Frankly, I hope I won't ever be in a position again to be quite so inventive."

"I don't mind telling you now," the Ambassador said, "that when I saw Magnan's report of your solo assignment to the case, I seriously attempted to recall you, but it was too late. It was a nasty piece of business sending a single agent in on a job with the wide implications of this one. Mr. Magnan had been under a strain, I'm afraid. He is having a long rest now . . ."

Retief understood perfectly. His former chief had gotten the axe, and he himself had emerged clothed in virtue. That was the one compensation of desperate ventures; if you won, they paid well. In his new rank, he had a long

tenure ahead. He hoped the next job would be something complex and far removed from Northroyal. He thought back over the crowded weeks of his brief reign there as Emperor. It had been a stormy scene when the bitterly resisting Rolan had been brought to face the High Court. The man had been hanged an hour before sunrise on the following day, still protesting his authenticity. That, at least, was a lie. Retief was grateful that he had proof that Rolan was a fraud, because he would have sent him to the gallows on false evidence even had he been the true heir.

His first act after his formal enthronement had been the abolition in perpetuity of the rite of the tourney, and the formal cancellation of all genealogical requirements for appointments public or private. He had ordered the release and promotion of the Battle Ensign who had ignored Rolan's arrest order and had been himself imprisoned for his pains. Fitzraven he had seen appointed to the Imperial War College—his future assured.

Retief smiled as he remembered the embarrassment of the young fellow who had been his fellow-finalist in the tourney. He had offered him satisfaction on the field of honor as soon as his arm healed, and had been asked in return for forgetfulness of poor judgment. He had made him a Captain of the Guard and a peer of the realm. He had the spirit for it.

There had been much more to do, and Retief's days had been crowded with the fantastically complex details of disengaging a social structure from the crippling reactionary restraints of ossified custom and hallowed tradition. In the end, he had produced a fresh and workable new constitution for the kingdom which he hoped would set the world on an enlightened and dynamic path to a productive future.

The memory of Princess Monica lingered pleasantly; a true princess of the Lily, in the old tradition. Retief had abdicated in her favor; her genealogy had been studded with enough Imperial forebears to satisfy the crustiest of the Old Guard peerage; of course, it could not compare with the handsome document he had displayed showing his own descent in the direct line through seven—or was it eight—generations of Emperors-in-exile from the lost monarch of the beleaguered Lily

Empire, but it was enough to justify his choice. Rolan's abortive usurpation had at least had the effect of making the Northroyalans appreciate an enlightened ruler.

At the last, it had not been easy to turn away forever from the seat of Empire which he so easily sat. It had not been lightly that he had said good-by to the lovely Monica, who had reminded him of another dark beauty of long ago.

A few weeks in a modern hospital had remedied the harsher after-effects of his short career as a gladiator, and he was ready now for the next episode that fate and the Corps might have in store. But he would not soon forget Northroyal . . .

". . . magnificent ingenuity," someone was saying. "You must have assimilated your indoctrination on the background unusually thoroughly to have been able to prepare in advance just those artifacts and documents which would prove most essential. And the technical skill in the production itself. Remarkable. To think that you were able to hoodwink the high priests of the cult in the very sanctum sanctorum."

"Merely the result of careful research," Retief said modestly. "I found all I needed on late developments, buried in our files. The making of the Signet was quite a piece of work; but credit for that goes to our own technicians."

"I was even more impressed by that document," a young counsellor said. "What a knowledge of their psychology, and of technical detail that required."

Retief smiled faintly. The others had all gone into the hall now, amid a babble of conversation. It was time to be going. He glanced at the eager junior agent.

"No," he said, "I can't claim much credit there. I've had that document for many years; it, at least, was perfectly genuine."

THE END

●

THE COMPLETE FATHER

All those old horrid emotions like Love and Parenthood—they have such a nasty way of hanging on, hanging on. . . .

By DAVID R. BUNCH

ACROSS the ice-bright fields of plastic she came toddling to show me her new-metal hands. And deep in my flesh-strips I felt a love tear try to surface, but of course it could not due to my new-metal eyes.

"My little girl! Growing up!" I said.

"Since you're my father," she said, "and it's my first, Mother said I should come show you."

Half past four she was. I looked at her. Half past four. "Growing up," I said. "My latest little girl!" Yes, they had brought her to us four and one-half years ago from the place where they kept the live womb-shells. Her mother and I had agreed by long-range conference over our multiviewers one day—she in her bubble home lounging, I across five fields in my own thinking stronghold — that perhaps it would be all right to have a last child. The ten others had all gone nicely—five sturdy lads and five lasses they were, well on toward being "replaced" now, all in domes of their own now, thinking along Universal Deep Problems. Yes, for a last child before they "replaced" me down there and before the womb-shell should be taken from the line of the actives and destroyed, or it might be returned to my wife as a memento if she wished. It was bright sunny May, I remember, when I went down with my last packet to the long glass hall where the Commissioner of Incubation accepted my germs. My wife had followed me all along on her multiviewer, so I did not feel alone. When the Incubator man said, "Which?" and I said, "Girl," and we joshed a bit, since he knew it was my eleventh, it seemed that the wife was there too, so smiling was her picture. "You're a brute for punishment," the

man said, and I said, "Yes!" although a bit later I said, "Nothing like children to keep the family alive." He agreed, and the wife smiled big.

When I went down to the place where they did it to the wombs she was soon there too, come whirring in on her beams to set her picture down by my side. In the cool clean, nearly airless, womb-room it seemed I could almost hold hands with her, so good were her beams that day, and I did not feel lonely while the miraculous act was done. In fact, who would say that it wasn't the best of conceptions—I, my wife's clear smiling picture, my wife's womb, the packet of germs and the efficient nearly-all-plastic ward boy administering things and making the right adjustments?

But that was more than five years ago. How time blasts off and rockets by! And here was Little Sister. "Hello, Little Sister." As four-and-one-half-year-old-like she gulped for her greeting I thought of how it had been, how they had all come across the white fields between me and their mother's place to show me their new-metal things. And how inevitably they had all been so proud of their first "replacements." "Growing up! My little boy!" Or, "My little girl!" I had said it to each of them in their turn. And then we had chatted on a bit about the newest in spaceships, or some Universal Deep Problem, they not understanding, I knew, but it was all I had to talk on, and certainly I wanted to show my interest and be a complete father. And then after things had grown tedious—in about five minutes, say—when they were tired of me and I was sick of them, it would be back across the yard to Mother's place, toddling, but walking proud always, glad of the new things they had got. And then it would take perhaps a year before they would be back again to pester, the occasion some major "replacement" from the Rebuilders—and I would have been free of them all that time to sit thinking in my hip-snuggie chair. Yes, I sat in a castle of thought while far away, across five fields, their mother reared them by automatics over in the nursery dome where she pressed the do-a-tot buttons.

She looked up at me, her blue eyes intent out of a face of beautiful flesh. And a tear tried again for my surface while I thought fast thoughts of new spaceships and longed for the tears to stop trying.

What an odd irritating little discomfort it was. "Little Sister," I said, "if you can't stop looking at me so, you'll have to fire up and blast off."

"Daddy!" she said, "Mother says I can't come back to see you for about a year. Not until I get my feet changed by the Rebuilders. And since you're my really Daddy, don't you think that's a too-long-time? I want to look at you!"

"No," I said, not thinking, "about a year. That's about right. That's probably the way your 'replacement' program has been set up. It's the usual."

"But daddies are supposed to be Daddies," she said all at once in a burst. "I've been hearing on the Programs . . ."

CRASH! My hip-snuggie chair hit its other two feet down from where I had them tipped for my thinking and instantly I was on my feet clanking and rattling and and sweating. "YOU'VE BEEN HEARING ON THE PROGRAMS?!" Then I knew how the wife had betrayed me. As a last, final chance to get to me she was playing tricks with the little girl's training, pressing the old tot buttons, letting her hear some of the ancient garbage of love, togetherness, and the family stew. "Little Sister!" I gasped, and I knew today I would not speak much of spaceships, nor the problems of the Red Galaxy, nor the space run to Marsoplan. "Little Sister, you'll have to hear me. And remember what I have said. Let your young mind cling to these things for your future may well depend on them all.

"Once, long ago, in an age of horror living, conditions were as your mother has let you hear on the old tot tubes in that abandoned nursery. People lived together in clusters of rooms, whole families lumped not only in each other's consciousness, but together in sight and smell as well as feel. Their personalities were untrue; their characters developed twisted; they were walking nightmares of contradictions because they warped one another by their proximity. They even ate together, food such as, think all the powers of Thinking, you have never seen—sustenance that often times came in great chunks which they took by mouth and actually had to chew and swallow by their own power. Now, who would have time for that today, what with the need for power mentalics and the overriding necessity for using all our abilities for Universal Deep Think-

ing?—And remember, THEY WALKED IN THE WEAKNESS OF FLESH ALL THE DAYS OF THEIR LIVES!"

Little Sister was dabbing at her eyes with her steel fingers, and for some unaccountable and wholly disgusting reason I felt the love tear deep inside me trying again to embarrass me. "It sounded so wonderful," she said. "Daddies loved their little girls. And sometimes at Xmas. . . . What's love? What does it mean?"

BANG BANG BOOM!!! I pressed the button for the Big Din, for this seemed IT, a minor "ultimate contingency," and all over my plastic stronghold noise things rapped together, and it was a worse sound surely than thunder and shore batteries and field pieces at cannonade in the old days before we shipped our atmosphere, most of it, out toward Marsoplan. When Big Din was over and I had pressed the all-done things she just stood there, a frightened little girl with steel fingers in her ears. "Love!!" I said in a quiet exclamation, and my voice filled up with horror to attain the complete effect, "let us not hear of that word again, ever, that nasty impossible word again, for which if ever again you mouth it here, your mouth will be rinsed out with plain boiling lead.

"Now, let us get on. A few of the horrors of the past I have hinted at, such as living together, having to chew actual horrible chunk food, and running around in flesh all the time with no hope of, or very little hope of—metal!" To strike a point home I leaped over suddenly until my steel feet were close to her and I gave her a horrible sharp little pinch on the face with one steel hand while I dug a steel fingernail into her ribs with the other, not injurious but painful enough that she felt it. While she shrieked and screamed getting over it I talked on matter-of-factly. "You see, Little Sister, in all the old days they had no hope. Flesh all the time and no chance of getting out of it, and the horrible pinchings and fingernail jabbings they must have done on each other all the time. How the blood must have flowed. And the screamings. Oh, horror! But you, Little Sister, have the fine hope of one day being nearly all new-metal alloys with the very minimum of flesh-strip holding you together, and that can be cleverly sheathed and camouflaged until almost no one can tell where to pinch you and jab

you. And besides, sometime you'll have a stronghold like mine, with all the weapons men and the warners to help you, and then you'll be nearly safe from all the pinchers and the jabbers because you can blast them from a long way out. And in these complete and full-filled days of the automatics, when we sit expertly served and think generally of our Universal Deep Problems, who goes visiting anyway? Except little girls perhaps, for a very short while, showing something new to their daddies."

I thought she might take the hint, stop screaming, show me her new hands again and then blast off for the stronghold home of her mother. But not Little Sister! She stopped screaming, jabbed at a couple of watery eyes and fixed me with a blunt stare. "I came for a good long talk," she said, "Daddy. And then you'll just have to walk me home, because by that time it'll be night, and I'd be SCARED to go across all that plastic in the dark by myself. And besides, you need to go over anyway to help press some of the buttons. Mama says she's getting fedup having to do all those do-a-tots by herself."

Oh, horrors! Woe! Worry! Damnation! Grief! What a pest are little girls. "I CAN'T DO ANY OF THE DO-A-TOTS," I said, screaming fast. "Besides, the agreement was, if I'd take the germs down to the incubator for you your mother'd do the do-a-tots and rear you. And anyway, there's trouble in the Red Galaxy lately and the space run to Marsoplan has been strangely deviating currently and requires that we all think clear. I'm sorry, but I've work here to hold me. You'll just have to let dark not catch you, and your mother'll have to do the do-a-tots herself. Because the Great Thinking of the Universe cannot be held up for any one child."

She started one of the fits then that I had hated so in the rest of the children. She threw herself on the floor. She jumped up and down on her knees. She made her new-steel hands do a tattoo against each other. She started to take off her clothes. And through it all she was yelling, "I want Daddy! I want Daddy!" Rotten vile little flesh creature, showing all this embarrassing emotion. But the upshot was I was soon out in the ice-bright plastic yard, dressed in an old throw-away space snuggie, headed toward Mother's place, and Little Sister was jumping up and down chortling beside

me, "Daddy's going to do a do-a-tot, Daddy's going to do a do-a-tot." And far overhead, somewhere out in the dark blue of the gathering darkness, I knew I was neglecting the troubles in the Red Galaxy and the space run to Marsoplan was in need of my best mental time. Thinking of all our Deep Problems and watching Little Sister so happily ignorantly flesh-ridden I felt a tear come up from somewhere deep away in an almost forgotten flesh-strip, and, breaking across them, it made a blur in some depth quite negating the marvelous precision of my wide-sweep mechanized eyes. Unable now to see clearly—indeed for awhile quite blacked-out—I clutched Little Sister's steel hand and we dug in staunchly, and I moved on through the slick yard with her, tear-blind in the coming of darkness.

THE END

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Must Humanity go through the test of the Leech in order to fight its way out of the. . . .

DAYS OF DARKNESS

By EVELYN GOLDSTEIN

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun; But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many . .

Ecclesiastes, 11

MARTHA Otumn sat spare and erect beside the high poster bed. The open gilt-edged Bible she held trembled in her fragile blue-veined hands. She read to her semi-invalid sister in sharp crystal tones to detract from the noises outside—the pitch of a populace in flight . . .

The gardener's cottage was set back from the road and sounds filtered through the closed windows like cricket murmurs from thick tall grass.

Zipporah's knotted fingers plucked nervously at the counterpane as though she knew *this* day was different.

Why is it, Martha pondered, that sick people and children sense discord, and respond with emotional affinity? Is it that excitement vibrates, pulling tension across the air like aggressively plucked harp strings? What else would make Zipporah glance toward the window so frequently?

Yet she could not possibly suspect the unholy Thing that had come upon the world. Or, if she gave it any thought it was with dismissal. Zipporah rarely listened with her mind to things that had no direct bearing upon herself or Martha. She would not read newspapers, and if any bulletin interrupted her soap-operas on the radio she muttered pettishly all through, never even hearing it, till her program resumed. Wars had left her untouched; elections meant nothing to her; disasters or jubilations were never acknowledged as existing. Her world was herself and Martha and a retreat to fancy or memories of the beautiful days when Papa and Mama had been alive and Otumn Estates behind its tall hedges and wrought gates had been the social center of Otumnville.

But Martha was all too well aware of the Terror that had come in a whirl of strange brightness almost two months ago and detected on radarscope to have landed in a north section of the State of Washington. Investigators arriving at the beam-tracked site had found it a desolate wood area with no sign of ground disturbance by any alien craft. Yet Something had arrived. For in a backwoods cottage belonging to two recluse brothers their bodies were discovered newly dead, their life blood drained and deep puncture marks in their chest. There was no evidence of any struggle. Implausibly it looked as though the victims had lain themselves down for a vampire's feast.

Witchcraft?

The rustling query went up, even as people in an era of missiles and split atoms laughed uneasily at themselves for asking.

Within a week a mountain guide's household of eight in the Blue Mountain region of Oregon met death the same way. Ten days later a hamlet in the Black Hill country was destroyed. Eleven victims—BUT—one survivor! The escapee was an eleven year old boy who supplied the first description of the Invader.

". . . like a big worm . . . maybe four feet long . . . I saw it rising up over the tall corn. But I didn't know then it had killed my pa and two brothers and the hired hands working in our field. I saw my pup-dog, ears drooping and tail tucked down, head whining for the woods back of the house. I lit after him. All I could think was to save my dog from that Thing. I could see it had a bunch of small wings down its sides, and it stayed in one place, like a 'copter does, while its wings beat faster and faster till it was—well, gone—not flying or anything—just disappeared . . ."

The Space Leech, they called it after that. Or just LEECH in capital letters or italicised.

It struck again east of the Nebraska Bad Lands—fourteen this count. And after that, seventeen, still in a south-east moving direction. Two more people escaped and from them came further information which, in the summation, made for panic news.

The Leech was invisible, except when feeding. It could stupify intended victims in the vicinity so they remained immobile while it went from one to the other till the hunger was abated. IT WAS GROWING!

Mankind's doom could be seen in this Feeder, that ate and grew and growing, must eat a greater number! Sparsely populated areas were ripe ground. The Government decreed a migration and the Exodus into cities was begun.

Martha had received a yellow circular yesterday. She knew state militias as well as Federal Troops had been assigned to a house to house evacuation. At any time they would be here. Her mind was in frantic circles how to circumvent the directive. An invader out of space seemed no real threat. But Zipporah's delicate physical condition and border line hysteria made unwise any sort of uprooting. And that was more immediate.

Even as Martha pondered, the problem was precipitated.

There was a knock on the door.

Martha sprang up. The Bible snapped closed and slid to the floor. She swept it onto her vacated chair and was at the door almost entirely in one motion.

It was a soldier standing respectfully there. "Ma'am," he touched his cap. Martha moved outside, closing the door behind her.

"Speak softly," she cautioned, "my sister is ill."

"Yes'm, folks down the village told me. We'll get an ambulance to help move her."

Martha shook her head. "We're not leaving the Estate."

"You can't stay here, Ma'am. They may have to bomb clean this area. Orders are to evacuate everyone." He was a very young corporal, and earnest, as the very young are earnest of their duties. And he was frightened too, with the fright of a child in the dark. But he was not alone in his fear, nor was it an unreasonable one. The Enemy you cannot see is always the most terrifying.

"They won't bomb us," Martha told him. She was serene. She had no qualms on this score, and her eyes went about the land that was theirs. "Otumn Estates can't die. It isn't like people. It's a tradition. It was built with the town, and the town still lives because of Otumn Lumber Mills." She did not add, "although it no longer belongs to us but was sold years ago to pay medical bills for Mama and Papa and Zipporah."

The soldier followed her gaze, taking in the seedy appearance of the grounds from the high ragged hedges that circled straggly lawns to Otumn House itself, boarded up, on the hilltop, like an emaciated patriarch, brooding because the mistresses had taken residence in the gardener's cottage down the gravel slope.

He thinks its old and neglected and worthless, Martha thought wistfully, but he never saw it as it used to be —when carriages from town drove to its gates; when the windows were wide and threw oblong light from crystal chandeliers over the dew-green lawns and curving driveway.

She longed to tell him how it once was—when Mama had been beautiful and Papa handsome. And Mama had never looked more beautiful than that night—forty years back —when they had given a ball to announce Martha's engage-

ment to young Dr. Archer Jones.

Mama always used to time her entrance when most guests had arrived so she could step out of her bedroom and stand, for a full dramatic moment at the head of the curving stairs from which she could be seen from the spacious hall and great arched living room. She used to wait for Papa to leave off conversing with guests and go quickly up to met her, gallantly offering his arm. But Papa missed his cue this night. He was leaning over a lovely red-haired widow seated on the green settee. The widow, newly arrived in town had captured many a wandering fancy. But Mama had been proud to mention to some irate wives that *Mr. Otumn* never allowed a pretty face to turn *his* head. Now the scene froze her at the top of the stairs till she became aware of a few smirking faces. With a proud toss of her golden high-piled head she swept her full train over her arm and took the descent alone.

No one was clear whether her sharp pointed little slipper caught in her gown hem, or on a loose weave of carpet, or whether it was a misstep. Mama made a futile reach for the polished bannister. Her fingers slid off with slender white slowness and Mama went down, tumbling, a silken thistle in a blown wind, to lay still, broken at the bottom.

Mama never walked again.

Mama grew twisted inside, like her useless legs. Her venom wilted everything it touched. It made a stooped, haunted man of Papa. It made the house close tight as a shriveled bud. Martha had been a pretty thing then, with aureate gold hair and great lilac eyes. So different from Zipporah, a thin shy girl with pale coloring and pinched features. Zipporah wept ceaselessly because Mama who had always caressed her and called her 'little mouse' now used the same name with a tone of scorn.

Mama died ten bitter years later. And Papa was broken. The business had to be sold and it was Martha who had to see that they managed on the remaining capital.

Papa died a year after Mama, and the funeral fell on a storm wracked day. And when they returned from the grave after services they discovered Zipporah was gone.

She had run like some wild demented thing to the woods that used to be Otumn property. Hours later they found

her huddled at a tree base, sodden and chilled. She was sick then, and sicker as the days went by. Rheumatic fever! And they were not sure she would live. But when the crisis passed she was a chronic invalid and holding to Martha as her bulwark and her strength.

In that quiet strength of hers Martha assured the corporal: "They won't bomb us."

"Not to be disrespectful, Ma'am, but you can't tell, since the Brass doesn't know themselves. They're going to stake out monkeys, chimps and even gorillas with electrodes fastened to them, and if anything unusual is recorded on the instruments they'll bomb every inch of the area."

"What makes them so sure it will come here?"

"Oh, they're not sure where It will come. But they've got some likely directions pinpointed. That's why they're clearing out every isolated house or farm in the areas of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia, and using monkeys as bait. We've got to get the people out. So Ma'am please take together your valuables and we'll come back with an ambulance."

At the word 'valuables' Martha had an idea. "Young man," she said, "we couldn't possibly take our valuables. There's Mama's what-not cupboard with the bone chinaware and cut crystal; and Mama's silver tea set and—"

"Ma'am, we'll board up the house so you needn't be afraid of looting. I'll get the okay from my lieutenant."

"All right. But remember we won't leave till we know it's all closed and safe."

As he strode away Martha caught the sound of movement in the house. From the corner of her eye she saw the pushed back curtain from the kitchen window nearest the door. She hurried into the house.

Zipporah was at the window, the hand crocheted bedjacket thrown carelessly over the long-sleeved, high necked nightdress. Her grey-black hair had come loose from the braids, and hung disheveled down to her waist. Her face was pinched with the white look of the ailing, and blue circled around the eyes. But the expression was bright with greed for excitement.

"That soldier," her bony hand clutched her sister's wrist, "what did he want? What did he say about boarding the house?"

"They have a company here on maneuvers," Martha lied glibly, "they think it best if

we move out of here for a while—to a hotel in town. They would supply transportation."

Zipporah's eyes widened. "Leave the Estate?" Her words trembled at the blasphemy. "Did you tell them we wouldn't go?" She leaned forward anxiously, appraising her sister's face. "You don't want to go, Martha, do you? They might separate us. Papa said you shouldn't ever leave me. Papa said I was always the delicate one, even if you were the pretty one. You promised him when he was dying!"

Martha took the thin hand, urging her sister back to bed. She sat with her on the quilted comforter, arm about her shoulder. "Don't worry, dear. We won't leave. We'll fool them."

Zipporah's eyes lighted, "Will we, Martha? How?"

"We'll let them board up the cottage. Then we'll tell them we'll bolt the door ourselves and go with our own doctor . . ."

"Dr. Archer?"

Martha winced at the malicious undertone. Zipporah always said his name with sly innuendo, never having forgiven her sister's prettiness. But Martha's dealings with the ill gave her endurance for the abrupt switches from unutterable gratitude to apathy to outright virulence.

Martha glossed over the barb: "But we won't really have to leave. And we must keep this secret between us, Zipporah. They must not suspect what we plan or they will move you to a hospital and me to a Shelter, and we would only see each other during visiting hours."

Zipporah pushed her fist into her mouth. A childish gesture that roused in Martha a well of maternal feeling. She kissed the wan cheek. "Don't worry. We'll never be separated. And we won't leave the Estate." She helped her sister back to bed. "Now I'll go down the road to see that the Corporal does the job right."

She caught up her shawl from the hook near the kitchen door, flung it over her shoulder and hurried down the gravel way to corroding iron gates set in stone pillars. One gate, torn from its top hinges by heavy gusts was solidly imbedded in the ground, and crawling vines had interwoven the scrolling. The other gate swung blindly in any wind, creaking like a gouty old man. Against this gate Martha leaned, pressing her face to the cold rough bars.

For a long time now there had been little use for the road that forked out of the main street of Otumnville and ran a mile through woodland to touch at the Estate gate, and curve seven rutted humped miles to the next town.

Today the road was jammed.

All roads East were jammed. The populace was moving in panic waves, in cars, on foot, by bicycle, along every available avenue, clearing the isolated land of human food.

Martha watched the faces.

They came out of an overcast of birch, cypress, oak and beech. The leaves pocked the December features, barren of every emotion but urgency.

". . . but, my God, if it's invisible, it might come at us now . . ."

". . . how you soldier-boys so sure it won't come to cities?"

". . . what's holding up the line?"

". . . Dickie, don't let go Mother's hand!"

"HURRY!"

Strident. Chattering. Terror terse. Fearful talkative.

And no one saw the beauty of the countryside. The spring loveliness that burst crimson, gold and emerald along the wooded path. Not one eye turned to touch a leaf or pluck a bloom. Only Martha saw Nature's portent. Flame blossomed azaleas were the burning bushes of this modern Exodus. But there was no Red Sea today between the Pursued and the Leech that was hunting.

Martha's gaze searched the throng, and the occasional staff car or jeep that slowly patrolled against the crowd. One car, non-military but with the license plates of a doctor forged against the melee, detached itself to ride to a stop at the gate where Martha stood. A man got out.

He was tall, white-haired, lean.

"Archer!" Martha came forward hands out-stretched.

He gripped her hands with the firm clasp of one who is more than a friend but—no longer a lover. He looked at Martha with keen gray eyes that had become very discerning of people, and mostly of her.

"You must leave here, Martha."

"I know." She was breathless. It was difficult to plan subterfuge on one who knew so well her habits, her thoughts. He knew her better perhaps than she did herself. Why did he look at her so piercingly? Did he guess the deception she planned? "I—I

was looking for a corporal who said he'd have them board the cottage."

"No need for that."

"We won't leave unless we know it's all closed and safe!"

"No one's closing their shops or homes. There isn't a looter who'd chance death by invisible means."

She looked up the slope to the great house sealed up since they had moved to the cottage because their meager capital no longer covered the necessary heating for the big drafty rooms. Behind the boards the furniture stood sheeted in ghostly darkness, except where a slat, more carelessly nailed, let through a slit of day to pry at the dust and the cobwebs.

"If we go away the cottage must be closed. Just like the house."

He sighed. "Very well Martha. And I'll see to having Zipporah moved.

"No!" She had not meant her voice to be sharp. Did it really rise above the roar of wheels and the piercing blasts of horns. Surely it was her imagination that he looked more sharply at her. "They will make Zipporah real comfortable the corporal said, and I can ride with her. We don't mind waiting for the ambulance. Really."

"All right. Now let's take a look at that sister of yours."

He took her hand and they went up the path.

Dear Archer, he worried so about her, though he had never openly quarreled with her about things she deemed best for the family. No open quarrel—not since their last —thirty years ago . . .

In that severe first year when she realized her family's complete dependence upon her she had told him, "I may not be able to marry you for a long time, Archer. Perhaps not ever and I'd rather you consider yourself free—to court someone else . . ."

"I won't give you up," he had stormed. "There's no reason why we can't get married and take care of your family too!"

"I wouldn't do that to you. It wouldn't be much of a marriage that way. My family needs me too desperately. They require all my time."

"I need you desperately!"

Martha could still picture him standing, elbow on the mantle-shelf above which hung the gilt scrolled portrait of the family—Papa, Mama and Zipporah as a shrinking child of eight, and herself, at twelve, prettily demure in her best white, sitting legs tucked

beneath her, in the foreground.

Archer had glanced at the portrait. "That's true to life," he had remarked cynically, "always at the feet of your family. Why don't you get up and stand away from them."

"But they need me!"

"And I need you too!"

"You're cruel! You tear me apart!"

"You tear yourself apart! You *are* your family! You are your mother's pain, and your father's helplessness and Zipporah's timidity! You feel so deeply for them that you aren't yourself anymore!" He had pulled her to face him. "Forget other people! Think of yourself!"

She had looked into his wretched face and became wretched with him. He caught the expression, and gently released her. His tone had been infinitely sad: "I'm sorry, Martha. You can't help what you are—a sounding-board for everyone's emotions. You're sorry for me when I'm sorry for myself. You're sick for the family when they are sick. I guess you'll go all through life being absorbed by other people . . ."

He had left her. He married a plain girl from a good staid family in town. She made him a proper wife till her recent death. He had led a comfortable life, although there were no children, and the townsfolk whispered that in a loveless marriage there is no blessing. They always felt that he never fell out of love with Martha. And Martha, if there was any ache in her exercised iron discipline which eventually strangled it.

She could regard him now in a light of respect, devoid of all passion. She could admire the gentleness and the surety with which he examined her sister. But her devotion and concern was for Zipporah whose pale eyes gleamed out of the white face. Martha's hands knotted over the bedposts. Surely Zipporah's barely concealed stimulation would be noticed.

The examination concluded, Martha followed Archer out to the kitchen. "Her pulse is very rapid today," he said in a low voice. Again he gave her that direct gaze. Flustered Martha cried: "Maybe I should give her two of the yellow pills!"

A long time ago he had told Martha that only the pills helped sustain Zipporah. Excitement, without the pills at hand might be fatal. Neither he nor Martha took the chance of running low on supply.

"I'll leave you extras to keep

on hand." He put a box on the kitchen table. "It might be wise to give her one before the ambulance arrives. And give her a white pill. It will make her sleep."

She accompanied him outside. On the step of the house he took both her hands, looking keenly into her face. "I know you don't think moving Zipporah is the best thing, but believe me the alternative might be worse. This Leech seeks lonely places and solitary people!"

"Why, Archer, what makes you think we won't leave! Although it seems to me there's an easier way of trapping this —Creature—than uprooting people, and bombing half the land!"

"If there is another way, they don't know it."

"But they should have some sane theory! Not blind destruction!"

"They have some theory. They feel there is some connection between the three people who escaped which might give the answer!"

"Connection!" Martha said scornfully, "between an eleven year old boy, and a woman who just gave birth to a baby after twenty childless years of marriage, and an old bedridden man seeing through the window his grandson being killed by this Leech? What connection?"

"Well, certainly not age or sex. Not even blood type. They put them all through complete physical checks. And that leaves some psychological abberation—"

A canvas hooded truck, khaki colored and with army insignia rattled up. Boards protruded from the open back, and on the piles sat soldiers in fatigues. Out of the front seat jumped the young corporal. "We'd like to start boarding up now, Ma'am."

"Oh, yes, of course." Hastily she said to the doctor:

"Don't worry. We'll follow your instructions. Good-by!"

He went away and the men began their jobs. Martha went inside to sit with her sister. For a while the house rattled and rocked to the hammers. When it grew quiet, shadows lay thick piled in the interior. Martha brought out for the soldiers cool cider. They drank and went away. To the corporal Martha said, "We will be going with our own Dr. Archer Jones. Tell your commander he need not send the ambulance."

Quietly she closed the door, bolting it from inside, sat in the dark, in stillness at the bedside of her sister.

Almost two hours later they heard the tread of feet on the gravel. Someone knocked loudly at the door. "Everyone out?" a voice thundered. They heard the doorknob jiggle. "Guess the old ladies have been taken. That clears the district. Tell the jeeps to pull out. This town's clean."

Footsteps and voices receded. The jeeps roared. Their motors faded down the road. Silence settled a thick mantle over the Estate. Somewhere insects chirped and birds twittered. But that was all. For perhaps another fifteen minutes the sisters sat in absolute silence. Then Martha stole to the door. Cautiously she opened it. Light spilled into the room. It made her blink. She was surprised. So much had happened she was amazed to see that it was still mid-afternoon. The road was empty. Hush lay expectancy over the atmosphere.

The land was waiting.

Martha closed the door and went back to the dim bedroom. She took Mama's silver candlesticks out of the what-not cupboard and selected two tapered candles from a box, cotton-batted to prevent cracking.

The room took on mellowness when she ignited the wicks and set them on the night tables at either side of the bed.

"There! That's comforting!" The gleaming candlesticks and tall candles brought back memories of social nights when tapers shone in the great hall and lit the huge dining table with its snowy cloth and sparkling porcelain. Zipporah saw the soft dreamy light of her sister's eyes, mistook it for reverie concerning the doctor, and gave a derisive snort. Martha started, and became all apology.

"'You have pain, and I'm day-dreaming. Dr. Archer told me to give you extra pills because of all the unusual turmoil . . ."

Zipporah laughed harshly, and snuggled back against the pillows in the manner of a well-content cat. "No pills for me today, Martha. I'm too smart for you and your fine doctor!" One bony finger pointed to the night-table. On the table was the water pitcher, all murky and flecked with dissolved grains. Martha stood aghast.

"The pills!"

"I dumped them." Zipporah's giggle was malicious. "I heard the soldier say they might bomb the area."

"But—"

The invalid pulled herself

to a higher position. Her eyes glared vindictively. "You and your doctor think you're so clever. But I know what you plan."

"Plan?"

"He wants me to take extra pills! Make me good and sleepy. Then you can run away with him. No one would know I'm alone and asleep in the house. All boarded up. They'll bomb . . . ffftt . . . No one to tie you down anymore. Dear, patient, devoted Martha will be free for her lover now that his wife is dead a full year!"

Martha looked wide-eyed at the spiteful face. Pity and love overwhelmed her so that she sank to her knees beside the bed, taking the wasted hand in hers. "Darling. I never planned to leave you. Archer is nothing to me or I to him, except friends. If I had wanted to leave you I would have —long ago. But You're my life. *You* need me, not *he*. You —the family—the House—only—are important to me."

Sullenly Zipporah pulled out of the other's grasp. "I saw Archer holding hands with you outside."

Martha laughed. "He held hands with you when he was talking to you after the examination."

Startled remembrance cleared Zipporah's face. In a small girl voice she said: "I'm sorry I dissolved all the pills." Her hand went into her mouth. "Now I'll die! Oh, I'll die! Don't let me die!"

"Hush. Of course not. Just don't get upset. I'll phone for refills."

She went to the wall phone. She heard the hollowness of an unreceptive line. Sickly she remembered. The telephone circuits were closed. The town was deserted. Slowly she put back the receiver.

What to do? Zipporah *must* have the pills. She hurried back to the bedroom. "Zipporah. The regular phone lines have been closed during the maneuvers. I'll have to go into town for other pills. But I won't be gone long. Maybe one of those nice soldiers will give me a lift in a jeep."

They had never needed to drive. Twice a week a boy from the supermarket brought their standard order of food and supplies. Dr. Archer Jones took care of the medicines. The old family lawyer, Mr. Ellington handled all financial matters. On the occasions when Martha had to go to town for anything she phoned the depot for the taxi service.

The mile to town was a

strenuous walk. She did not take it leisurely. At set spots along the way she came upon a tethered monkey or chimpanzee, and once glimpsed on a hill top a gorilla staked by a long chain. They chittered, or scolded as she passed, and she was stirred to pity for the scapegoats. "Poor things," she muttered, "Poor things." It made a kind of rhythm with her walking. She alternated with "Poor Zipporah" since the years had accustomed her every thought in direct relationship to her sister.

She came to the main street, and turned down a side street to the white house with the doctor's shingle. She knew every part of this house as well as her own. When Old Dr. Archer Jones had been alive and Papa's best friend she had often come here to play. And in these latter years when the old doctor had passed on leaving his practice to his son, she had come often to consult about Zipporah, or to pick up personally the medicines when an overload of calls made impossible Archer's stop-over at their place.

She hastened up the walk and rang the bell. Immediately she realized that habit had put her finger to the bell. Of course, the house was empty. Weakly she leaned against the door. What to do, what to do? Archer was gone!

She moved along the porch to the side window. It was not fastened. She raised it and painfully clambered over the sill. She was in the ante-room. Without hesitation she went into the office. The glass and porcelain cabinet with its array of gleaming doctor's instruments was there, and underneath it the white drawers in which he kept pills, salves, tonics, tongue-depressors and even the famous lollipops for the children. She knew that on the second shelf to the right was the brown jar from which the doctor refilled the little vial for Zipporah.

Eagerly Martha turned the cabinet knob. Locked! Despair settled over her. She shook it off. Without compunction she went through the door which led off to a side hall. The back of the house was given to the doctor's living quarters. With perfect familiarity she went into the neat kitchen. She pawed through a utility drawer under the formica counter. None of the knives would be strong enough. She eyed the poultry shears for an indecisive moment. Just then she glimpsed the bright polish of the meat cleaver. Just the tool!

Back in the office with the cleaver she brought it forcefully against the plywood cabinet and the thin veneer splintered. Again and again till she had the needed opening.

There was the brown jar. She lifted it.

At that moment she became aware. There was an aura of malignancy. It seemed to weave like a cobra's head in a weird striking dance, seeking a bird to entice—to devour. Seeking. And with it—utter silence!

The chittering had stopped. Even the hum of insects had died. Vial in one hand, cleaver in other Martha went to the door. At the top step of the porch she saw down the street. At each spot where animals had been staked there was silence of paralysis.

"Zipporah," Martha whispered.

She began to run. All down the street and out onto the road she ran. Her shawl loosed from one shoulder, flew back, flapped to the pavement. Martha never was aware of it.

Zipporah. Zipporah. All Martha's concentration was on her sister. Clear before her rose the picture. Zipporah in bed. Zipporah alone. Afraid. Unprotected.

Martha raced. Her feet went up and down mechanically. Time and place were things not of her existence. Only one thing was real. Zipporah.

In times of stress the endocrine secretion of the body is greatest so that a person can perform feats beyond their normal ability. Martha's body took up her emotional need for endurance.

Yet it seemed an eternity before, gasping, she reached the Estate gates. She burst up the gravelled path. Into the cottage.

Zipporah was queerly still on the bed. The Leech was feeding . . .

They were a strangely silent group around the four-poster bed. There was a four-star general, and two aides, a tech-sergeant who had driven their jeep and Dr. Archer. Their faces were pale. Seasoned fighters though most were they averted their faces from the region of the bed. Only Dr. Archer continued to look, and his gaze held that mixture of horror and compassion, and a dawning awareness that brought the questioning gaze of the others to him.

"You knew these sisters," the General said, "and you suspected something like this . . ."

"I suspected something, but not like this! I knew they had deceived me when I checked the Shelters and found no ambulance had brought them. And when your remote electro-cephalic instruments recorded a wrongness of complete inactivity I could not let you bomb——knowing they were still here. But I did not expect to find—this . . ." His voice broke on sorrow, but resumed in a moment with a determination to make them understand something he had realized.

"I know now your weapon against the Leech."

"Weapon? But, Man, there's no need—"

Dr. Archer turned weary eyes to the General. "We'll have to be watching the skies now. Perhaps this is some cosmic test to see how much humanity we humans have achieved over the mileniums."

"I don't understand."

"You saw the recordings of the instruments, Sir. All the primates had been grippd by some paralysis. Yet it is obvious that one was not. Why should this be? Why should one be—unnoticed?"

"Unnoticed? An odd choice of word, Doctor."

"Not odd at all, Sir. Let us suppose the town is a barnyard. Into the barnyard comes a fox. The barnyard creatures flutter and set up a squawking and flutter their wings and try to run. The fox leaps from one to the other snapping necks. But just suppose one fowl is sleeping. Through all this ruckus the one creature sleeps, so quiet in its corner that the fox is unaware of its existence. And let us suppose this is not an ordinary barnyard but a place full of primates, and the fox not a fox but the Leech. And the squawkings and flutterings of the people that guide the Leech is the sense of survival within us. In times of danger we are fearful. The will to survive is such an integral part of life that when a stimuli threatens our lives we think automatically with basic panic—"How can I escape?" *"I!"* Now if, as I am supposing, the Leech is a creature tuned to the vital life-force personality, it sends out mental emanations which paralyze the victims whose raw emotions have betrayed them.

"But suppose we have people who never think of themselves—whose concern is outside their own persons. The Leech would not receive the personality emanations and would therefore, be totally unaware of the existence of such individuals.

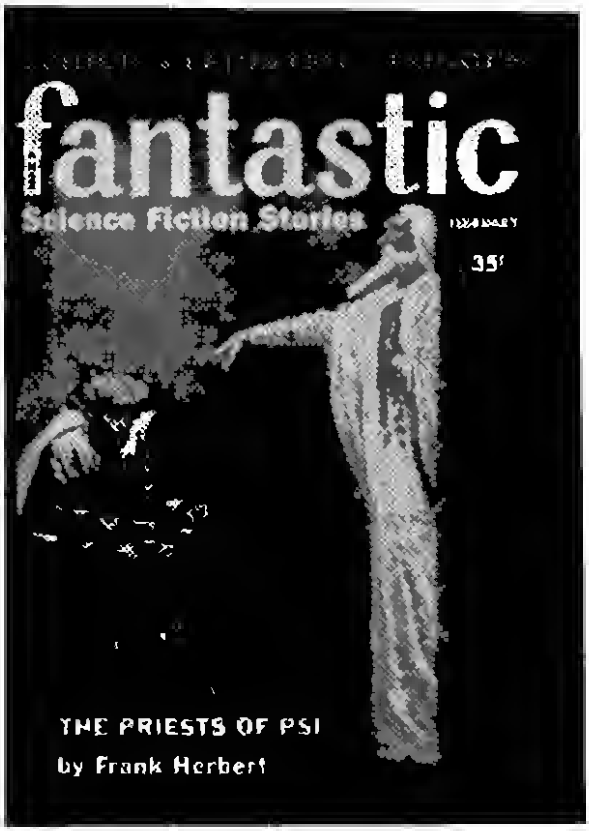
"In the case of the survivors of the Leech's previous attacks each was concerned not for his or her own safety, but for another's."

The doctor sighed. "Perhaps we must take heed of this primary warning: If the Leech is a forerunner of invasion from its kind, then the hopes of mankind lie in its selfless people. Survival will come through the love of one's neighbor over one's self!"

Huddled on the floor near the bed where her dead sister lay Martha did not comprehend or hear the words of the men about her. Eyes vacant, hands moving up and down with automatic precision she continued to hack away with the cleaver at the chitinous litter that was all that remained of the Leech from out of space . . . **THE END**

COMING NEXT MONTH

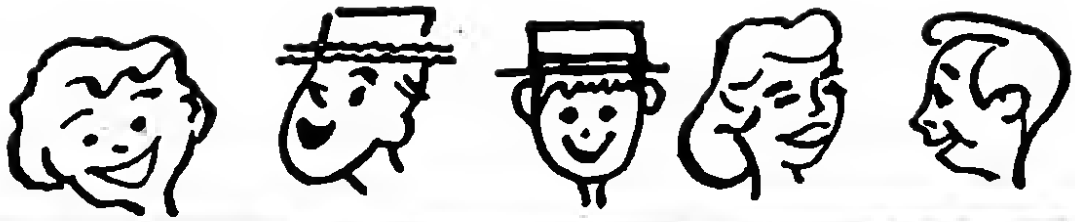
Top-name writers fill the table of contents in the February issue of FANTASTIC SCIENCE-FICTION STORIES



Frank Herbert spins a yarn of action and supernarmal worlds in his short novel, *The Priests of Psi*. **Fritz Leiber** returns with a touching shart story, *Mariana*. **Murray Leinster** spells out one way to keep a dictatar happy in *Tyrants Need ta Be Laved*. And **Arthur Porges** rings an unusual change on the mad scientist theme in *Off His Racker*.

PLUS—several other top-notch short stories and all the regular features in the February FANTASTIC SCIENCE-FICTION STORIES, on sale January 19, 1960.

Reserve your copy at your newsdealer's now.



According to you...

Dear Editor:

I enjoyed very much the November 1959 issue of *Fantastic*, the issue entirely by Fritz Leiber. In particular, I liked "Lean Times in Lankhmar," as I was beginning to believe that we would not see any more of the adventures of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser.

I would like to see, in the not too distant future, another one-man issue featuring L. Sprague deCamp. This author has, like Leiber, appeared in print far too infrequently lately, and I'm sure that fandom would greatly appreciate it if you would remedy the situation.

John Boardman
630 South Crouse Avenue
Syracuse 10, N. Y.

• *We hope to have more one-man issues, but it's hard to pin the writers down long enough.*

Dear Editor:

I thought the front cover on the last issue of *Fantastic Science Fiction Stories* was really something. "Lean Times in Lankhmar" looked more like an amateur's best first sold story than anything else.

Can you get a short novel from Jack Sharkey? the Elvis Presley of science fiction and fantasy. It should be more interesting.

James W. Ayers
609 First St.
Attalla, Ala.

• *Well, you can't have everything.*

Dear Editor:

In my four years of reading science fiction, this is the first time I have written a letter to an editor. But now I feel the time has come for me to tell you how much I enjoy your magazine.

All stories in the November issue of *Fantastic* were excellent; but, in my opinion, none were on a par with "Tranquility, Or Else!" And "The Reward" wasn't nearly up to the level of the others. I realize that you can't be expected to fill an issue with stories that please everyone. If I pick up a science fiction magazine with only half the stories to my liking, I feel that it's well worth the purchase price.

I really like Jack Sharkey's stories, and I think he's one writer who'll go places. Get as many of his stories as possible in future issues.

I do have one fault with *Fantastic* though: the discontinuation of the book review section. Maybe only a page or two, but you should have one.

Wayne Cheek
Gibson Station, Virginia

• *Sharkey is going so many places it's harder than ever to get his stories.*

Dear Editor:

Just completed October issue of *Fantastic,* and want to say I found two stories in this issue outstanding—over and above the usual, and for many books back.

"Ship Ahoy" by Jack Sharkey rates Number 1. It was such a delightful and refreshingly different story. I look not only for good stories but the theme—and this one was so different, and in a very entertaining vein. I felt I just had to write you. It was a real welcome change on the lighter side—and still in the realm of fantasy.

"Empathy" by Tom Godwin was my second choice. Those furry little Altairians, with their lisping speech and humble worship of their human masters really caught my heart. Makes us almost wish we had one!

The story of "Empathy" was good, but Mr. Godwin's power with words is what catches my fancy. He so describes the little Altairians' feelings of faith, worry and fear that you can almost

feel they are alive and human. The whole story was very well and very descriptively written.

Mrs. M. Steele
St. Louis, Missouri

Dear Editor:

Congratulations on your Fritz Leiber issue and the breaking of the editorial taboo of printing all stories in one issue by one author.

Leiber is one of the finest authors on the scene today and is responsible for my purchasing this particular issue of *Fantastic*.

I don't usually buy your magazine, but if you keep up this practice and print some of the better writers like Leiber, Anderson, Phil Farmer, Sturgeon, etc., I'm afraid I'll be compelled to buy more!

Tommy Long
1201 W. 47th St.
Richmond, Va.



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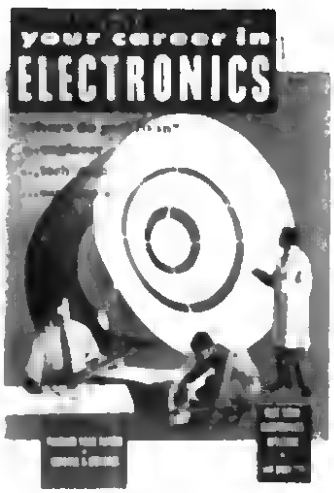
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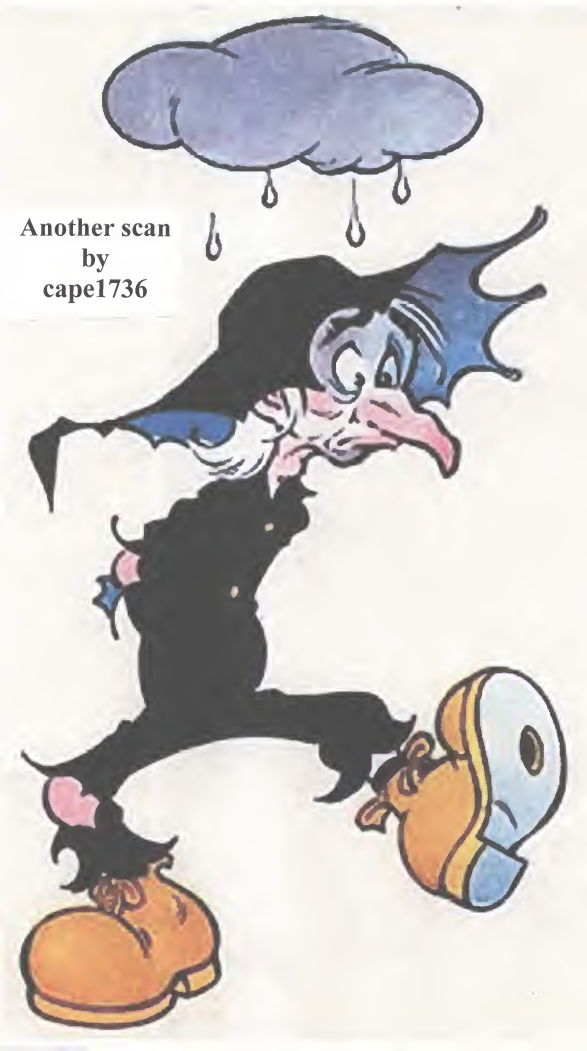
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